

Ecclesiastes and the Feast of Tabernacles (Part 2)

Why God Does Things The Way He Does

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Given 18-Sep-93; Tape #095

In last week's sermon, we saw a book whose discouraging and pessimistic outlook (or theme, I might say) is established right at the very beginning, in the second verse with the statement: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," says the Preacher. Modern translators put a little bit more meaningful word in there for most of us—that is, they translate that as life being meaningless or even absurd.

But I want to inform you that the final conclusion of the book ends on a very positive note. It dogmatically tells us to fear God and to keep His commandments because this is the whole man.

There is no doubt that throughout the book, Solomon's thoughts vacillate between pessimism and joy, and the joy is there because he does believe that there has to be a good reason why God does things the way He does. I think that we have to take up on this and understand that even though this book is generally pessimistic, there is an awfully good reason why God included this as a part of His Book. It is important to us.

The Jews assigned the reading of this book during the Feast of Tabernacles. I think that what they concluded, regarding the purpose of this book, very much applies to the Feast of Tabernacles. We are looking at it at this time so we will be able to keep the Feast of Tabernacles with a better understanding.

What God is doing through Solomon's experiences and conclusions is actually defending a life lived by faith in Him, by giving us a true account of the grimness and meaninglessness of its alternative.

This brings us right back to the purpose of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles presents us with a contrast of two alternatives by virtually forcing us to reflect on where we have been (the pilgrimage aspect) and where we are going (the Millennium or the Kingdom of God aspect). It is designed to make us look both at the pilgrimage and the goal of our pilgrimage.

On our pilgrimage, we are constantly facing the choice of whether to stay on the path toward the Kingdom of God or to choose its alternative of casting our lot with the world. What God is exhorting us to do in Ecclesiastes is to stay on the path, because even under the best circumstances—that is, Solomon's life, where Solomon was endowed with tremendous intelligence; he had money running out of his ears; he had wisdom; he had power; he had the ability to discern; he had the ability to do almost anything he would want to do—so his conclusions regarding matters are very important to those of us who do not have the powers or the capacities of mind that Solomon had. Yet, we would wish very much to do the things that Solomon was able to do.

Would we possibly find happiness in doing the things that he was able to do? That is what this book addresses. God is showing us, through the life of Solomon—this man that He endowed

with so much—that apart from God, life is absolutely, absurdly meaningless, regardless of how smart you are; regardless of how handsome or pretty you are; regardless of how much money you have; regardless of your abilities to build things; do anything (virtually) that you want to do in life—everything is at your beck and call, but if there is that one thing missing, then life becomes absolutely meaningless—not only meaningless, but downright frustrating and hopeless.

With the inclusion of Solomon's conclusion (and that truly was Solomon's conclusion) that the end of the whole matter is "fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole man"—a life of faith, a life of belief in God, a life in following what God has commanded us to do—life then loses its meaninglessness and the person is then enabled to meet the trials of life knowing that there is a grand purpose involved in everything that is happening.

Before we go any further in this sermon, there are four things I want to bring to your attention. Number one is because of time constraints, we will not be able to get completely through every chapter. In order to do that, I think I would have to spend a minimum of twelve sermons—one sermon for each chapter to do any kind of justice to it.

What we are really getting is an overview of what is contained in this book. I know in just the studies that I have made the last couple of weeks, I have found it to be a book that is extremely rich in terms of wonderful common sense.

Number two is there is a phrase that appears very often in the book called *under the sun*. Basically, what this phrase means (if we are going to paraphrase it into modern English) is apart from God. *Under the sun*—God is above the sun; God is in heaven. *Under the sun* means below heaven so what Solomon is talking about is through carnal rationalism. He is not saying and God is not saying that this is entirely bad. But *under the sun* essentially excludes God from thinking.

Number three is the word *wisdom*. In most cases, it means common sense; it means shrewdness; it contains no moral content when it is seen in the context of under the sun. God is not saying that this is evil at all. In fact, it is basically good as long as we understand that it does not include a moral content to it.

True godly wisdom, though, is never detached from morality. It is *always* guided by morality; it is *always* guided by the commands of God; it is *always* guided by the way of God. When Solomon would say in Proverbs, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord," he means true godly wisdom. But in the book of Ecclesiastes, a person can have wisdom and not be following God at all. He is talking about shrewdness; he is talking about common sense, but he is not saying it is evil. Understand that.

Number four is that even though Solomon goes into a fair amount of specific areas of life in this treatise—he talks about the family; he talks about companionship; he talks about money; he talks about pleasures and things of that nature—he is not really particularly interested in them. They are merely illustrations of his main point of why he came to the conclusion that he did. His main point is with life as a whole. The main pursuit is how can one keep life from being meaningless.

We are going to begin in chapter 2 (because we got to the end of chapter 1 last week), which is

built on the foundation of the conclusion of chapter 1. You remember that chapter 1 talked about the endless cycle of things in nature—that life keeps repeating itself over and over again. The water evaporates into the air; the water falls as rain; the water goes into the river; the rivers go into the sea; it gets evaporated again and on and on it goes.

There is just a seemingly meaningless round of things that are going on in life over which a person has no control. Solomon is saying that the things that happen in a man's life have the same kind of rhythm to them. They just keep repeating generation after generation. It seems like every generation has to reinvent the wheel. It forgets what went on before, and it has to go through the same cycle of things. Life seems to have this repetitious thrust to it and Solomon says it is meaningless.

Chapter 2 is built on that conclusion—that wisdom (common sense, shrewdness) is not the answer. It is hopeless to count on human wisdom or shrewdness as being the means by which the meaning of life can be found. So then Solomon indulges himself in pursuing pleasure, that is, having a good time.

Everybody wants to have a good time, especially the young. They want to spend their time partying. They want to spend their time going to athletic contests. They want to spend their time going to the movies. They want to be around crowds of people that might be drinking, that might be laughing—it is something that the Bible might call folly. It does not have a show of wisdom to it most of the time. It is just simply having a good time; only he was going to do it as a way of life. We are going to look at this.

Ecclesiastes 2:1 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter—"Madness!" and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?"

One translation even says, "I will plunge into finding pleasure!" Another translation says, "I will pour myself out at having fun!" Solomon followed his own advice in Ecclesiastes 9: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might." He did it with all of his might, but it also says he did it in such a way that he retained his mind, his head. He did not give himself over to drunkenness because he was always evaluating cause and effect. "What is going on? What will be the conclusion? What will be the effect of this that I am doing? What will be the fruits of it?"

What he finds out is that this kind of approach to life is temporary, it is meaningless, and that having fun cannot quench the thirst every human being has for meaning. "What does life mean? Where am I going?"

Everybody has that. Everybody may not be able to verbalize it clearly. They might have a yearning, an ache, but they do not know what to say it is. Well that is what Solomon is looking for—what can give life meaning.

It is interesting that two items are specified. In my Bible, one is translated *laughter* and the other is translated *mirth*. There is a difference between these two. Laughter describes partying. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! That was funny!" Everybody is a little bit high; everybody is a little bit on the edge; everybody is conducting themselves a little bit silly. There is a bit of inhibition.

Mirth, on the other hand, describes thoughtful pleasures. A thoughtful pleasure might be something that has a more serious approach to it, but it is something that the person really likes to do. It is not bad; it is not evil. It might be a hobby. It might be reading novels, even some of the finer writings of men.

Solomon looked at it from two different perspectives—partying and the pursuit of more thoughtful pleasures. What he concludes is that laughter is sheer madness. It has absolutely nothing of any value to it, except maybe it makes you feel good for a couple of seconds. But its value quickly passes away.

Mirth, though better, still changes nothing regarding the meaning of life. It adds nothing. I mentioned the reading of novels. The reason those things add nothing is that the authors do not know what the meaning of life is. They cannot include it in the source of their story. That is why we have these super handsome men and beautiful women and all the fictionalized things that are there.

This section is a warning to those who envy those who seem to enjoy the finer things of life; those that think that if they just had enough money to indulge themselves with cars, with clothing, with fine homes, that they would be content.

In my own life, because I was part of the ministry of the Worldwide Church of God, I had a new automobile about every sixty thousand miles. It was their policy to trade them out at that time. To the Worldwide Church of God, to the administration, the automobile was just a tool. They considered the dollar and cents thing to it, that the car was beyond the place where it was going to be profitable to use it. At sixty thousand miles they traded it out and got me a new one, not because I was John Ritenbaugh, but simply because they thought it was a good economic policy to follow. But as a result, John Ritenbaugh had twelve new automobiles.

Do you know what I have found from my experience? It was really nice to have a new automobile for about two weeks. After that, it gradually became exactly the same as the old automobile. There was no real profit.

You know very well that there are principles at work in life and maybe you have experienced them. You have gone through life, let us say as a young married person, and you are making four dollars an hour. You were thinking along with your wife and making plans, "Boy if I just made five dollars an hour, everything would just be hunky-dory." So you made five dollars an hour and then you began to think, "Boy if I just made six dollars an hour, life would be so much better."

So you made six dollars an hour. It changed nothing. Why? Because there is a force in life, in our culture, that the expenses always rise to meet the income. In addition to that, we have something supplied from the Bible. It is in chapter 1 and it tells you the eye is never filled nor is the ear. Human nature is insatiable. It is never ever satisfied.

With God's Spirit, a person can have a much greater sense of contentment. But even in that, it takes a great deal of maturity (using God's Spirit over quite a period of time) before one comes to the place where they can truly be content. Paul said he had learned to be content with what he had; he had learned to be content with life. It did not come naturally. The growth in the

Spirit of God is what brought him to the place where he was content, even (I guess) to be floating/hanging onto a log in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea (which happened to him one time).

Solomon is going through this experience. He said, "Well, partying did not really help all that much." He says in verse 3:

Ecclesiastes 2:3-9, 11 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. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. 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. 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. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

Solomon kept his wits about him in all of this, but verse 11 is saying the morning after the night before finally arrived—the time he had to give sober thought to what had been accomplished in his life. It almost literally means (when it says, "I looked on all the works that my hands had done"), translated into English, "The time came to face the facts."

He finds that though there had been pleasure in being busy in accomplishing, there was no real gain in terms of meaning of life. When he says vanity of vanity, he does not mean that nothing was accomplished from them. Certainly there was a measure of good accomplished from them, but they were disillusioning in terms that it did not give him lasting satisfaction.

Money and the pleasures it can buy do not lift us out of our earth bound frustration. What is going on under the sun has to be connected to something that is going on somewhere else. That thing that is going on is the purpose of God.

Solomon was forced to ask himself a question and that appears in verse 12.

Ecclesiastes 2:12 Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who succeeds the king?

What can the person who follows Solomon do that Solomon has not only done, but it was done better than they can ever hope to do, because the man was so endowed with gifts by God. His

conclusion:

Ecclesiastes 2:12-13 Only what he has already done. [Wisdom is not without its value.] Then I saw that wisdom [common sense, shrewdness, being worldly-wise] excels folly as light excels darkness.

It does have goodness to it. It is not without its value. It is far better than foolishness, but it is not the ultimate source of reliance. You cannot put your trust in being worldly-wise. In verse 14, perhaps the book reaches its low point right here:

Ecclesiastes 2:14a The wise man's eyes are in his head...

The wise person really knows where he is going. He has goals in his life and he works hard to achieve them. His eyes are in his head.

Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15 ...but the fool walks in darkness. [The one who is seeking folly, mirth, pleasure, and so forth.] Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all. 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 is also vanity."

The ultimate frustration. Solomon discovers that the stupid idiot is going to share the same fate that he does. They are both going to die. He asks, "What good is it to become wise?" Then he thought of another terrible thing.

Ecclesiastes 2:16 For there is no more remembrances 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 said, "Hey, I have done all this stuff that after I am dead, nobody will even remember who did it." Look at what is happening. People are calling the Bible—Adam and Eve and so forth—myth, legendary characters, allegories, not real people. Do you realize it has just been within the last year that archaeologists have dug up secular evidence for the existence for the great David of the Bible? The first time ever.

So what happens? He remains a shadowy figure until something apart from the Bible "proves" that David ever existed. One of the greatest men who ever lived and the world wonders whether he ever lived or was he just a composite figure of Hebrew writers trying to extol those of the past.

Solomon says, "That is not fair," when he begins to think that same thing is going to happen to him. He says, "Life is meaningless."

Ecclesiastes 2:17-18 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. Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

Who knows how good *he* will be!

Ecclesiastes 2:19b-23 ...This is also vanity. Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill [probably himself], yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.

Right here the book of Ecclesiastes takes a very encouraging turn. Solomon begins to lose his sense of hopelessness and we have, beginning in verse 24, the first positive reference to God in the book. In chapter 1, God appeared, but it was not in a very good sense. But here in chapter 2, verse 24, the book begins a positive turn that continues throughout the book.

You will see, when you study the book yourself, that there are still despairing things in other chapters. However, it is a despairing thought on an individual specific area of life and does not have a great deal to do with his overall conclusion. In verse 24, there is a conclusion.

Ecclesiastes 2:24a Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor...

You just saw before this he said that all of his labor was nothing but frustration. Now he has a little bit different tune. He is beginning to introduce the positive side of the book of Ecclesiastes. He has painted so far a very dismal picture of life. Now a change begins because he has presented the worse part of his essay.

Ecclesiastes 2:24b This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.

God intends that we receive enjoyment, fulfillment, good education, positive things from the work that we do. This is from the hand of God. God's intention is that we do receive good things, but remember, Solomon was making his judgments here in the first two chapters based upon things that are under the sun apart from God.

What he is beginning to say is life begins to flesh out, life begins to have meaning, life begins to have fulfillment (the right kind), life begins to have its enjoyment, its right kind of pleasure, its right kind of balance whenever the person is connected to God.

In other words, the kind of things Solomon did earlier—all of the works he entered into; his seeking after pleasure; his observations of the repetitions of the cycles that go on in earth; his seeking after wisdom—all of these things are seen from the perspective of a person disconnected from God.

Ecclesiastes 2:25 For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?

That is a good question. Nobody has ever had the qualities, the abilities, and the opportunities Solomon had to test these things.

Ecclesiastes 2:26a For God gives wisdom [another good thing] and knowledge and joy [notice the qualification] to a man who is good in His sight;...

Now we are beginning to see another factor. Is it better to receive a gift from God or is it better to work for that gift (if I can put it that way) in the way Solomon did? It is better that it be given by God. What he is saying is that God can turn —with your understanding, with your help—something that would normally be meaningless and absurd into something that is profitable for you, if you will let Him. To the person "who is good in His sight"

Ecclesiastes 2:26b but to the sinner [notice this] 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.

This is an overall conclusion he has reached here—that eventually the evil on the earth are working for the benefit of the righteous. Eventually all is going to come to those God considers good.

You have to see this in its full scale. Who is going to inherit the earth, brethren—not only inherit the earth, but everything that is in it? The sons of God.

Solomon is looking at this in a very long range way. Eventually, if a person is righteous, the wicked have been out there building and gathering for the work of the righteous. All that they are doing is a vanity to them, but it is a gift to the righteous from God.

Chapter 3 is tied directly to the end of chapter 2. It has to be seen that way, because chapter 2, verse 24 saw a turn in the approach that Solomon was writing in the book. He then begins to show that indeed (in more specific detail) there is a repetition of events that occur to everybody. It does not mean everything here occurs to everybody. This is a generality.

There is a time to be born; a time to die. There is a time to plant; a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill; a time to heal; a time to break down—these are all things that are occurring in the lives of people.

The overall sense of the chapter to me seems basically neutral. However, I would have to say

that in an overall sense, there is a positive value to what is written here by Solomon.

What we have is a process of opposites or a process of contrasts. What Solomon is going to lead to is that there is a perplexing aspect to this, and that is that almost all of them are out of a person's control.

You have no control over when you are born. You have little or no control over when you die, and on and on it goes. You have little or no control over when you have to plant things. It has to be done in accordance with the seasons that God has arranged. You cannot arrange the seasons. God did that. There also is a time you are forced to pick what you have planted unless you just want to lose it. All of these things have an aspect that is beyond the control of us.

What is he beginning to deal with here? He wants the godly to understand that there is very, very much in life that is beyond your control. We have to deal with it. If life is going to take on the right kind of meaning, we have to be able to deal with this—that there is very much that is beyond our control. We can do very little about that. If you do not deal with this properly, you are going to live your life in a very frustrated state.

Solomon wants everybody to understand that we human beings are not the masters of our destiny like we would like to think we are. Everybody wants to control his destiny. Solomon is saying that is a vanity. It is frustrating. You can do a little bit, but there is going to be much in life that is going to be completely beyond your control.

The positive aspect of it is because it is attached to what preceded it—chapter 2, verse 24: "I saw this was from the hand of God." And verse 26: "For God gives wisdom." These occurrences, Solomon is saying in Ecclesiastes 3, that God is involved in them! He is saying that there is a measure of providential control in the cycle of these occurrences. They are not haphazardly occurring. God is involved.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11a What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task [this is still positive] with which the sons of men are to be occupied. [Now listen to this:] He as made everything beautiful in its time...

We can see that. A beautiful flower comes out, but it is only beautiful for a little while. It is beautiful for a while, but not always. Now here comes the catcher:

Ecclesiastes 3:11b Also He has put eternity in their hearts [that is, the sons of men] except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

So he says that even though things are beautiful—and in an overall sense he means life is beautiful—it is perplexing because we cannot figure out what God is doing. We have a deep desire to understand the beginning from the end. Do you not like to know how things are going to end? Everybody wants that. Everybody would like to know a little bit about what lies ahead in the future for them. But we cannot know, so life has its perplexing aspect to it.

Maybe what we want is to have insight into a sense of something that transcends our immediate situation. But we are left without really knowing all we want to know about the future as it relates to right now and what we are going through.

This has a very beautiful purpose in it. It is God designed. He has not told us everything. Why? It forces His children to live by faith. "The just shall live by faith." Those who trust God are going to be cognizant of the fact that they cannot control everything and that they have to put their reliance not in their wisdom, not in their abilities, not in their intelligence, not in their power, not in their money—their reliance has to be given over to somebody who is in control of these contrasting things.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 I know that nothing is better for them [those who believe; those who are willing to give their life and trust to God] than to rejoice, and do good with their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.

What is he concluding here? In these things he just mentioned, he is saying it is God who keeps the cycles recurring (even in the weather; even in other things that he mentioned in chapter 1) and that there is a security in knowing that there is a steady Hand at the helm—One that can be absolutely relied upon.

What he is saying here then is that life is not out of control. Do you believe that? You have this desire to know, but you cannot know the future, not completely. God has not given anybody that much insight into what is going on. So Solomon's conclusion is: Make the most you can of your life right now. (He is not talking about being imbalanced. He means doing things in a right order and in balance.) But do it with the understanding that there is a steady Hand at the helm and things are not out of control.

Where do you think Paul got the principle in Romans 8:28, that all things work together for good? I think I can almost guarantee that a major portion of it came out of the book of Ecclesiastes.

The thing that we have to do is trust God. Are we willing to do that?

He goes on to other things here. We will jump over chapter 4, but there is one more thing I want to get out of chapter 3 that I think is important.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17 Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there. 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."

Solomon is saying in effect that where one might expect righteousness (as in a court), one finds iniquity. But he is saying, "Hang on. God will judge." But there is another very important point

to understand and that is that God's plan seems designed to show men how weak and meaningless they are in the overall movement of life.

Even justice and wickedness serve a purpose in the scheme of things. Though they are painful for us to deal with, they are providing a massive demonstration of our ignorance of our own nature, because it clearly reveals the overall character of mankind as it is without conversion.

This is a tremendous benefit to the converted because they can always look at the world and say, "Do I want those results?" If what you see in the world motivates you to fear God and follow the path toward the kingdom—even though it might be painful; even though it causes a great number of sacrifices; even though what the world is doing is bearing heavily on you in the form of persecution or some kind of tribulation—it is doing a positive work in your behalf if it keeps you on the track.

If there were not a benefit coming from it, Solomon is saying, God would not permit it. If you did not know what evil was, you could not repent. The world shows us, in very clear detail, what evil is. We have the opportunity to evaluate whether or not we want to do the things that produce that. That is what Solomon is saying. Even in the courts, you are going to see evil; even in religion, you are going to see evil. He says to expect it and do not be frustrated by it.

The beginning of chapter 4 is another turning point, in that Ecclesiastes becomes very much like the book of Proverbs. There is a difference though in that Proverbs gives short succinct statements, whereas Ecclesiastes tends to have short succinct paragraphs. In other words, there is a bit more detail that is given in the book of Ecclesiastes than in the book of Proverbs.

From chapter 4 on, it touches on a great number of subjects such as life itself or the hardships of life, companionship (which incidentally is the major theme in chapter 4). In fact, the theme of companionship goes all the way up to verse 7 of chapter 5. It talks about poverty; it talks about wealth; it talks about authority; it talks about kings; it talks about the limits of wisdom and the encroachments of folly, and what kind of an effect it has on people's minds.

It goes into these things, some of them in great detail, which we do not have time to go into. However, there is a great deal of wisdom that is contained in those areas.

I might just hit a couple of high spots for you. In chapter 4, verses 1-3, he says the world shows a long history of oppression—the strong oppressing the weak. Regardless of when people live their lives, their lives are only relatively better or worse. In other words, you really would not improve your life by going back to the time of Solomon; or you would not improve your life by going back to the time of Christ; or going back to the Renaissance; or going back to the 1800s; or going back to the Wild West.

There is no such thing as the good ole' days. Just a little bit later in this book, he says that. There is no such thing. Life has always been the same. That is hard for us to grasp. That is because people are driven by the same things. They are driven by envy; driven by desire; and that is something he goes into in verses 4-7.

He says the major reason for hard work among men is rivalry, competition. Somebody is trying to outdo somebody else. Success breeds envy by neighbors. So hard work, by the neighbors, is entered into in order to outclass somebody else. But Solomon reaches the conclusion that

rivalry does not produce lasting companionship.

What do rivalry and competition produce? Enemies. He then says that contentment is two times better than the futility of pursuing after gain, that is, the keeping up with the Joneses is a futile thing for a person to do.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one because they have a good reward [the idea is still companionship] for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. [That is a benefit of companionship. There is a tendency to help one another.] But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has not one to help him up. [It is good to have companions.] Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? [The illustrations are simple, but they make succinct value of having friendships.] Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon is saying (basically) that companionship has the benefit of producing strength. In unity, there is strength. I might also add that the proverbs that are given in verses 9-12, for instance the one in verse 10—if they fall one will lift up his companion—it would not be helpful for you to think of this merely in terms of somebody falling into a ditch. That is very obvious. He is talking about not only is there help in companionship for somebody who literally falls in a ditch, but rather, if somebody makes a mistake, your companion very likely can cover it and maybe help you out so your error does not hurt you so badly. Companionship gives strength. There is a great deal of help there.

I want to jump all the way to chapter 11. This chapter marks a very decisive change in the book, in that it not only becomes much more positive than it ever has been preceding this—its tone becomes very positive—and even though there were some exhortations prior to this to go in a certain direction, it becomes very exhortive at the beginning of chapter 11.

What he is doing—remember the term *qoheleth*, which means *the lecturer* or it can mean *the preacher*. The preacher is now calling on the people who are listening to his dissertation to make a decision. He really does not say, "Well, you can make any kind of decision you want." He weighs his advice very heavily in one direction. He said, "I want you to make a decision, but this is the decision I think you ought to make."

It becomes very positive in its tone and exhortive in terms of making a decision as to what they should do with the knowledge he has given them in the lecture thus far. What he does is he strongly urges his readers or his hearers to cast their lot with God.

This section that begins in chapter 11, verse 1, actually ends in chapter 12, verse 7. There is a sustained theme of exhortation to people to hold wholeheartedly to the faith and decisive commitment of obedience to God, regardless of whether life is adverse or comfortable.

Remember at the beginning of the book, he said life is frustrating. If God is involved in a person's life, the person has the opportunity to take a great deal of the frustration out of life. It

will take the meaninglessness out of life, the vanity out of life. But all the children of God are required to make that choice because both choices are still there.

Not only that, but we know from earlier that the life of the person who is living by faith is also going to be filled with many of the same kind of adversities that those living in vanity are. He has to live life with the understanding that there is much that is out of his control, over which we have no control. The Christian therefore has to deal with this.

The way you deal with it is to make a decisive commitment to cast your lot to live by faith. If you do that, then Romans 8: 28 is going to be fulfilled in your life. The difficulties will be there, but because you have involved God in the way that you live your life, then all things (indeed) are going to work together for good to those who are the elect and to those who love God. Is that clear? That is what Solomon is talking about here.

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

Here is a call to faith. He is saying to you and me that the use of faith is always going to contain an element of risk of loss because we do not know the end from the beginning. We do not know the future except in vague terms. We have this desire for eternity within us. We want to have insight into what is going to be the end of this situation that we presently find ourselves in, but we do not know the complete answer.

Therefore Solomon says it will never work out right unless you decisively commit yourself to live by faith—cast your bread upon the water. Cast your lot with God. Take that risk, he is saying.

If one does this, it is going to demand commitment in the same way a businessman must commit to his investment if there is going to be a profit. What if a businessman commits his capital to some investment and he does not give himself over to making sure the business makes a profit, if he does not really cast his time, his energies into making it a success? It will not be a success.

This verse lays the foundation for what is coming in the rest of the chapter.

Ecclesiastes 11:2 Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth.

He is saying, "Okay, you are committed. Be enthusiastic and generous in your commitment." He is saying invest everything you have in this life of faith. Do not be misled; the term seven or eight means many, not just a specific number.

Ecclesiastes 11:3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie.

Solomon is saying there is going to be many unanticipated things occur in life. A cloud goes

over. You do not know if it is going to rain or not. If it does go over and it dumps all its water on you, it may wash your farm away. You did not plan for that. He is giving a warning on the one hand. He said, "Risk what you have and give your all to living a life by faith." Be generous and enthusiastic in doing it, but also be aware that there are going to be adversities. Things are not always going to go the way you would like them to go.

Unanticipated things are going to occur. We cannot control the difficulties of life. Things happen. Earthquakes happen; tornadoes happen; hurricanes happen; huge thunderstorms happen. We have to be ready with the right kind of mind to anticipate these things.

Ecclesiastes 11:4 He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

Here is a warning against procrastination. The warning is: Just because you do not have the complete picture is no excuse for inactivity. He is saying to get moving, because the good things God has to offer will not come to those who waiver (James 1). Do not procrastinate; plunge in!

Solomon was a mover and a shaker. He got things done. He learned right principles of how to make a success. Though he is giving them to us in very quaint illustrations—things we cannot easily relate to—he is nonetheless giving us steps to success with God. The key to this is the faith that God is with you and that God is going to work these things out, but He is requiring things from us—commitment, decisive commitment, enthusiasm, no passivity, do not procrastinate, plunge in to doing the right things with God. Get moving.

Ecclesiastes 11:5 As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.

I think that it is very likely that the word *wind* is not properly translated. It should be translated "spirit." The word spirit fits with what the context is in verse 5. "How the bones grow in the womb." What is he talking about here? It is an illustration from Solomon of how ignorant mankind is regarding even something so close as the child in the womb.

Which of you, within the sound of my voice, knows when the spirit in man is given? I do not think that is something that God has revealed in His word. Is it at conception or is it when the child takes its first breath? That is what he is talking about here. Solomon did not know either.

He uses that as an illustration that there is much in life that we do not know. He is showing that there is an element to life in which we must throw our whole trust to God's manifold wisdom and care of each of His creatures, because we do not know what He has in mind with His purpose. His purpose—that is the key.

Ecclesiastes 11:6 In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Since we are not infallible—we are ignorant of a lot—and we do not know the outcome of every event, the best thing Solomon says is to give yourself wholeheartedly to the responsibilities of life and trust God.

In this verse, he is encouraging us to be unremittingly diligent. The phrase, "In the morning sow your seed and in the evening do not withhold your hand." That word "in" is not properly translated. "Until" is better. Now reread it. "In the morning sow your seed and until the evening do not withhold your hand." Keep on working; keep on going.

Do not allow yourself to be discouraged because if your faith is in God, He will follow through and make things work for good. That is His promise and that is what Solomon is encouraging here.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-8 Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun; but if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that is coming is vanity.

Light is a symbol of the goodness of life, or we might say joy in this context. He is saying that life is just not good of itself, but it is to be savored with enthusiasm as one might enjoy honey.

Life is good, but he said it could even be better. This is quite a change from the beginning of the book, where he said life was frustrating and meaningless and absurd. Now he is saying it is not that way at all. But the difference is that God is involved in the life that is good and things will work out for the good. God will be the one who takes the frustration out. It comes as a result of His Spirit.

It is intended that life be enjoyed all life long, but Solomon is saying at the end of verse 8 to take advantage of it now, because the clock cannot be turned back. All that is coming is vanity, death. Verse 9 picks up on that.

Ecclesiastes 11:9-10 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity.

Whereas chapter 11 concentrated on exhorting us to be enthusiastically committed, the beginning of chapter 12 exhorts us not to forget God in our enthusiasm. It is easy to do that.

Rejoice, but do not forget God! God intends life to be good, but do not forget Him. Does that not mean then that if you do not forget God and you enjoy life that you will enjoy the things that God allows you to have, but you will never allow them to control you; that you will always keep your appetites in check because of your fear of God; because you want to impress Him; because you want to do right and good? And yet you enjoy what God has given. That is what he is

talking about.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 Remember your Creator while you are young,
before your vitality is impaired by the infirmities of old age.

He is urging this because when God is neglected, the capacity for having joy in one's life is diminished. Solomon is saying, "Get started right now!"

Ecclesiastes 12:2 While the sun and the light, the moon and the
stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain.

There is a progression from sun to moon to stars. Can you see a diminishing of light? What did light represent in this context? It represented joy—the goodness of life. What Solomon is saying is as a person ages, his capacity for the enjoyment of the good things diminishes. What he is doing here at the beginning is underlining the inevitability of the problems of old age.

In an overall sense, even though it says directly, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth," what he is really saying is, "Get started now! Do not wait! Do not delay!" Live life the right way because as you get older, your capacity to enjoy diminishes.

Ecclesiastes 12:3-5 In the day when the keepers of the house
tremble, and the strong men bow down; when the grinders cease
because they are few, and those that look through the windows grow
dim; when the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding
is low; when one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters
of music are brought low. Also they are afraid of height, and of terrors
in the way; when the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper is a
burden, and desire falls. For man goes to his eternal home, and the
mourners go about the streets.

These are very interesting metaphors. The "keepers of the house" in verse 3 are a person's arms. You work with your hands and arms and they keep the house. They begin to tremble—he is talking about the progression of old age.

"The strong men bow down"—the knees, the legs, they begin to get weary; they begin to bow from the weight of the body on top of them.

"When the grinders cease"—that is the person's teeth because they are few. They are falling out. "And those that look through the windows"—that is the eyes, because the eye is growing dim.

"When the doors are shut"—this means when the person tends to stay inside because they just feel more comfortable being closed up in the house. They feel safe. They do not worry that they are going to have a heart attack out on the street, so they just sort of become reclusive in old age in their house.

"And the sound of grinding is low"—he is talking about the work cycles. He is using the grinding of grain. Apparently, when they did that in those days, the whole community ground the grain together. There would be one mill and everybody would come there and everybody in the community would have a lot of fun. They would be laughing and enjoying the friendship, companionship, and fellowship with people at the mill. But as a person gets old, he does not have the strength to go to the mill and enjoy the pleasures of that work.

"When the almond tree blossoms"—apparently, when the almond tree blossoms, it turns white. Solomon is talking about the hair first getting gray, and then finally turning white.

"And the grasshopper is a burden"—this is an interesting picture. Everybody ought to know how light a grasshopper is, but he is saying even the lightest thing becomes a burden to an old person because they are losing their strength.

"For man goes to his eternal home"—the grave—"And the mourners go about the streets." Solomon is showing over these verses, beginning in verse 1, that death is seen as the climax of a process that began with birth and the strength of youth, until finally the person dies.

Ecclesiastes 12:6 Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed [broken], or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well.

Apparently they are all metaphors or figures for the value of life—gold and silver. Life is good, Solomon says. So again, he is encouraging you to take advantage of what you have been given before it is too late, because everything is going to return to the dust and the spirit will return to the God who gave it.

Verse 8 reminds the reader where the treatise began. A person's life will end in vanity if he does not take advantage of the life of faith that God has given to him. His life will simply end in meaninglessness.

He says to fear God and keep His commandments. He is saying to eat and drink joyfully, but to do it in balance. Never lose control of yourself. Work with purpose. Do it diligently. Enjoy your marriage with your mate. Seek wisdom and use it.

Ecclesiastes has contrasted alternative approaches to life. It has put them over against each other. It has pointedly elucidated the implication of each and it has forcefully commended the one over the other.

I want you to think of this as you prepare to keep the Feast of Tabernacles and as you keep it: God has set before us two ways and the Feast of Tabernacles and the teaching that is in due season forces us to look both backward and forward. Backward to a life that has been and now is, compared to what He says is coming, and He commands us then to choose life.

Can you begin to see why the Jews chose Ecclesiastes for the Feast of Tabernacles? At the Feast of Tabernacles in the Old Testament, God does not emphasize the Kingdom of God. He emphasizes the pilgrim aspect. It is the New Testament that emphasizes the goal in life of the Kingdom of God.

Deuteronomy 30:15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.

That is what He has done in the book of Ecclesiastes. He has expounded Deuteronomy 30:15-20. He has devoted an entire book to it. Which do you want, He is saying.

Deuteronomy 30:16-19 In that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away [if you want to live a meaningless life, if you want your life to be absurd, if you want your life to end in absolute vanity] so you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.

That is what Solomon has said in the whole book, only in much, much greater detail.

Deuteronomy 30:20a ...that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice,...

Give yourself wholeheartedly, enthusiastically, and decisively; commit yourself to Him and remember Him, beginning right now! Do not procrastinate! Plunge in, Solomon says!

Deuteronomy 30:20b...and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life...

God can make lemonade out of lemons. He can make all these adversities and hardships of the world work for our good—these things that are beyond our control. He can make it work out so we get benefit from these things that are positive toward His kingdom, and life then is not meaningless.

Deuteronomy 30:20c...and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Remember that as you prepare for and you keep the Feast of Tabernacles. Evaluate the past; evaluate the present, but commit yourself to the future.

