

1. This is one of those chapters that I can summarize in a few quick thoughts:
 - a) Solomon tried living life by having as much fun as possible - that didn't give him joy.
 - b) Solomon tried living his life by working hard and building things - no joy there.
 - c) Solomon thought about just having wisdom to do it all - still left him in a bad mood.
2. Essentially, that is it. As I read this chapter over and over again, I kept thinking about a line from a movie that is also the title of the movie. Jack Nicholson was playing someone who broke into a meeting between his psychologist and another patient. Jack looked at the other patient and asked out loud, "What if this is as good as it gets?" This other patient was telling the psychologist about his life. That doctor's session was interrupted by the Nicholson's character asking, in effect "What if life does not get any better than this? Then what do you do?" The patient never answered, nor did the doctor and that was the end of the scene.
 - a) In effect, that is how I see Solomon at this point in this story. He is trying whatever it is he can afford (no limit), whatever he is capable of doing (he oversees great building projects) and just spends time considering life. I sort of picture Solomon at this point wondering out loud, "what if this is as good as it gets?" Thus, that's my lesson title for this chapter.
3. With that introduction done, let me back up and explain where we are, and what is happening in this book so far. The author is not named by name. We know that the author is either a son, or a descendent of King David, as that was part of Verse 1 in Chapter 1. The only person who fits that description who was also king over all of Israel. He had the time the financial resources and God given wisdom to figure this all out. That describes King Solomon. He was a son of David and the next king of Israel after David. If you still have doubts that Solomon wrote this, see my lesson on Chapter 1. If you trust in what I believe is the fact that Solomon wrote this and he had the ability to do these things, then we can move on and focus on this chapter.
4. Ok, enough about Solomon, what about us? Why should I read this lesson? What I want each of us to think about is the question of "What if this is as good as it gets?" What if our life never gets any better than it does right now? First, if one is sick at the moment, I'm not talking about that. If one is say in a wheel chair or has some major disability one has to live with permanently, that is a part of what I am talking about it here.
 - a) To paraphrase a quote my wife taught me: "Dear God, give me the strength to change the things You want me to change and accept the things I cannot change". That leads me back to "What if this is as good as it gets?" This is about the things in life that we have to accept and can't change. That includes the idea that there will always be situations and problems we have to deal with no matter what we accomplish.
 - b) To say it another way, if all we do in is enjoy the best entertainers out there, we will still have problems we have to deal with. If we become very successful by building up great companies or complete big projects or have accomplished all our goals, we are still going to have problems when we are done. If we do just sit around all day and think about life and what would be a smart way for us to live our lives, our problems will still be there.
 - c) So, are you saying we should sit around and worry about our lives? Should we complain if our lives never get any better than they do right now? Of course not. The point of all of this is one has to appreciate life for what it is at the moment. There are no guarantees that life will get better for us. It may, or it may not, but it is not guaranteed.
 - d) The other thing Solomon is saying is even if one has all the money or time in the world to do great things, it doesn't help you to appreciate life any more than one can do right now.
5. All of this talk about "what if it doesn't get any better than this" does not mean we should never try to enjoy our lives or never try to appreciate our lives. Just the opposite is true. It does mean that we trust God to guide our lives and appreciate the gift of time that God does give us.

6. So is the solution, "Don't worry, be happy?" The issue is not the reality of whatever it is we have to deal with at the moment. The issue is our attitude through it all. Remember that God wants us to have joy in our life. Let me once again state the difference between happiness and joy:
 - a) Happiness is based on one's circumstances at the moment. If one receives a big gift, one is most likely going to happy for the moment.
 - b) Joy has nothing to do with circumstances, but only with one's outlook on life.
 - c) What Solomon is trying to explain to us is that even if one had all the money and the skill to accomplish anything one can imagine one may not have joy in life. One may be happy based on what one did accomplish, but accomplishing those goals may no brings us joy.
 - d) To explain this concept another way, I always think about successful athletes. After they finally win the big championship, there is usually a let down feeling that it is not as great as they had thought. They usually realize that the journey to get there was where the real joy in life comes in and not just the big moment where they won the prize. That to me is what Solomon is trying to teach. Have joy through one's life no matter the circumstances.
7. With all that said, it might be best at this point to just start the text and we can see how it is that Solomon himself learned this valuable lesson after a lot of years trying to figure out how it is we are to have joy in this life. With that said, I present Chapter 2, Verse 1:
8. Verse 1: I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. ² "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?"
 - a) I doubt when Solomon was king, there were say, comedy clubs one could go to. However I am sure that great talented entertainers existed in his day, as they do in our day. Even if one was not a professional entertainer, some people have the gift to entertain publicly and make others laugh and that is a gift to be appreciated and used. Whoever was the best at that in Solomon's time was probably hired to visit him in his court. Remember Solomon had unlimited resources at his disposal and the time to kill so he could afford this luxury.
 - b) I'm sure Solomon found ways to make himself laugh out loud. Considering that he had over 700 wives and 300 concubines (See 1st Kings 11:3), he needed a sense of humor just to survive all of the arguments. By the way, neither I, nor the bible ever condoned having more than one wife. It's hard enough trying to make one spouse happy. I can't imagine trying to make a thousand women happy. Anyway, did Solomon have a good sense of humor? I would argue that he literally went to excesses to see if one could have joy in life just by spending as much time as possible doing humorous things. If he was willing to try excess marriages, I also picture him trying living by just trying to enjoy himself.
 - c) Solomon's conclusion of the matter comes at the end of the book. The point in effect is that spending time enjoying oneself is not a bad thing. If it is the only thing one lives for then one will never have joy in one's life. This comes back to the idea that we need to live a God centered life in order to appreciate it in the first place. Am I against the idea of say going to a comedy club? It depends for me on the type of entertainment. However, I do take my daughters to Christian based comedy function at times and enjoy it greatly. The point is that laughter in itself is not a bad thing. My point is without living a God centered life we can never have true joy no matter what we try. That is the case Solomon is going to build as we go through the different examples of things that he is going to explain that he did as we go through this chapter.
 - d) This leads me back to me my lesson title of "What if this is as good as it gets?" Solomon's point was not that the entertainment he sought was a bad thing. His point is if all one has in life is entertainment, no matter how good it is, it is a wasted life. One may notice that a lot of professional entertainers also like to get involved in politics. Whether they realize it or not, they desire to make a significant difference in the world. They realize that through entertainment alone, they can't make that difference, so politics then becomes their way of trying to prove their value to the world. Now comes the next thing Solomon will try:

9. Verse 3: I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.
- a) When Solomon first became the king of Israel, he asked God to give him great wisdom in order to be a great king. The bible records that God gave him wisdom. (See 1 Kings 4:29.) The problem with that gift was that in effect Solomon was stuck with it. No matter how much he laughed, no matter how much alcohol he drank, no matter how much fun he had in the years that describe these verses, he was "stuck" (for the lack of a better word) with great wisdom about how life works.
 - b) In effect, Solomon was back to the question of "What if this is as good as it gets?" I'm sure he woke up many a morning with a hangover or after many a wonderful night of having fun with great entertainment and wondering, "is this all that there is to life?"
 - i) Solomon had that question running through his head no matter how much fun he had during that time. Again, he was "stuck" with wisdom. The question is in effect whether or not all of that pleasure was worth the trouble?
 - ii) One has to remember that Ecclesiastes is not a book saying, "Don't do this or that". It is a book that teaches us the principal that without living a God centered life we can never appreciate all the good things that He has given us. Can Christians go out for a night of entertainment? Of course. What about alcohol? The bible never condemns drinking, just being drunk. The issue always comes back to the idea of are we pleasing God at the moment or not? Sometimes we should spend time with loved ones just enjoying each other's company. That is why I don't have problems with good entertainment. One just has to consider whether or not we are making a difference for God by whatever entertainment we do choose at any moment in our lives.
 - c) Notice this verse has the phrase "few days of their lives". This is Solomon's way of saying that life is short and one has to use the most valuable asset God gives us, our time in order to make a difference for Him. No I don't believe that means we have to be serious all the time. It just means that our time is the most valuable thing we own. We should consider carefully how we use that time. That realization about time was the wisdom Solomon was stuck with and that is the wisdom that all of us need to consider as we live out our lives.
 - d) Meanwhile, it was time for Solomon to try more things to make himself happy.
10. Verse 4: I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.
- a) One has to remember that all of this took place roughly 3,000 years ago. If one travels to Israel, one discovers that archeology and the tourism that supports that archeology is big business in that country. Among those archeological discoveries are some of the things Solomon did do as described in these verses and elsewhere in the bible. He had overseen large palaces built for himself and for his wives to enjoy. While we don't have his gardens and fruit trees, archeologists have found the reservoirs as described in Verse 6. To keep it simple, picture three reservoirs, each roughly the size of a soccer field, and each was also very deep. One can visit those reservoir "holes" today in Israel.
 - i) My point is simply that when Solomon says he took on great building projects, he wasn't kidding. They were huge in size and scope and based on the archeological evidence they still are magnificent in size to behold.
 - b) I have lived a privileged life in that I had the opportunity to see some of the great man-made parks and gardens that have been built in different locations around the world. I'm sure Solomon's, which I have not seen would outdo all of them. I'm sure that whatever it was he built, it was a popular place for local travelers to see at that time. I'm sure that it gave Solomon a great sense of satisfaction to see them and others to enjoy them as built.

- c) With that positive thought stated, let's get back to "What if this is as good as it gets?" That in effect is Solomon's question after he completed those projects. Yes those projects were great accomplishments and I'm sure Solomon got a great sense of satisfaction seeing them as completed. It is like when I described athletes in the introduction to this lesson, they realize after they win the big prize, the joy is in the journey itself, and not just in seeing the final prize being won.
 - d) I remember a line from an old movie that said in effect, "One of man's greatest moments in life is when he accomplishes something bigger than himself". I'm sure that is the sense of accomplishment Solomon must have felt when he finished these projects. However, he still had to deal with his gift of wisdom, and realized after all that he has accomplished, it was still not satisfying to him. It was as if Solomon realized something was missing.
 - i) What is missing is that if we don't live a God centered life, no matter what it is that we accomplish, life is ultimately a waste of time. It does not mean that all of these building projects were bad things. I'm sure that there were many people back then that appreciated what Solomon had built. Again today, there are tourists traveling today to see what it was he had built about 3,000 years ago.
 - e) So can I go visit this great park or not? Of course one should enjoy one's life. That is one of the things this book is teaching. At the same time, the underlying message is without living a God centered life, one will never truly appreciate all the wonderful things there are to do in this life unless one accepts the fact that God exists and ultimately he made it possible for us to enjoy what this life has to offer.
 - f) Meanwhile, Solomon still has more things to say about his own accomplishments:
11. Verse 7: I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man.
- a) By now we are getting the flavor that Solomon did whatever he could afford to do. If one reads through 2nd Chronicles Chapters 8 and 9 one gets more of a flavor of all the things that Solomon did accomplish and how many servants he must have had.
 - b) It may help to recall a little more history here: Solomon's father David conquered most of the surrounding nations and brought a lot of wealth back to Israel. Solomon applied his wisdom to trade with other nations to make the countries wealth even greater. That is why Solomon had a lot of stuff and a lot of people to manage all of that stuff. One gets a flavor of what Solomon had in these verses and also in those chapters in 2nd Chronicles.
 - c) OK John, we get the idea that Solomon was not only very wise, but also very rich. We get the idea that he could afford to do whatever he wanted to do and had the time to do it. We also get the idea that God gave him the wisdom to think about these things and put them into perspective about his time span on earth and all of history. So what? The "what" is the question of "What if this is as good as it gets?" What if we had all of that money and all of that time, would we be happy, or would we be wondering like Solomon in effect, is this is as good as it gets? The bottom line for you and me is that having more stuff and if we even had the time to appreciate all that stuff, this alone would not make us happy.
 - i) That is why many wealthy entertainers in Hollywood seek to make a difference in the world through politics because they have come to realize that having fame and fortune alone is not enough to make them happy.
 - ii) That is also the lesson that you and I need to learn no matter how successful we may become in our own lives. It is not about wealth or even living comfortably, it is about using the most valuable asset God has given us, our time in order to make a difference for Him. But if we have lots of "stuff", can't we make a bigger impact for God with that stuff? Yes but the secret is not to acquire it in order to make that difference, but just to start now and let Him grow our ministry on His timing.

12. Verse 9: I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.
 - a) Here is the summary statement of what we have read so far. Solomon was well aware of the fact that God gave him great wisdom. Even after spending years involved doing the projects mentioned in the first eight verses, he was "stuck with" the gift God gave him. In effect, that gift became his downfall as well as his strength. Because he realized God gave him wisdom, he thought he was free to do whatever he wanted without having to honor God with his life on a daily basis.
 - i) Let me explain this a little better historically. 1st Kings Chapter 11 says that when Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart to other gods (Verse 4). In Verse 8 of 1st Kings Chapter 11, it mentions that he built altars to these other gods.
 - ii) My point is history records that Solomon's strength also became his weakness. He did turn from God, but because he did retain the gift of wisdom from God, he was aware that what he did was wrong.
 - b) OK, too bad for him. How does that affect me? The point is that the bible clearly teaches that God gives each of us gifts (Ephesians 4:8). When we turn away from God, He in turn, does not take away our gifts, as a reminder to us that we still belong to Him, even during the times when we turn away from Him. Those gifts are unconditional, but they also do remind us that He desires that we get our relationships right with Him at all times.
 - c) Meanwhile, back to Solomon poetically considering the power and gifts he had.
13. Verse 10: I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.
 - a) It's interesting for most of us to imagine having all the money, time and power we could ever want. Imagine having no pleasure refused to us. Imagine accomplishing all sorts of great building projects. Even with all of that realized Solomon was stuck with the fact that God gave him the wisdom to put all of that in perspective.
 - b) It is fun to consider having all of that, but what is the cost? The cost is to realize that one day we are still going to be accountable to God. Solomon is not saying that accomplishing great building projects is a bad thing. He is also not saying that enjoying one's life is a bad thing. What he is saying is without the eternal perspective of realizing that if we don't use our lives to make a difference for Him, no matter what we do accomplish, in the end it is a waste of time or "vanity" as the King James Version of the bible calls it.
 - c) On that convicting thought, let's move on to Verse 12.
14. Verse 12: Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?
 - a) As one gets older, most people like to reflect upon their lives. What have we done or not done to make a difference? If we take the time to stop for a moment and let strangers tell us about their lives, they will tell often us what they have accomplished in their lives or if they are younger, what they would like to accomplish. Now consider Solomon, who had more resources and time to appreciate them than possibly any other human in history can brag more than anyone. Yet he realized what a waste all of those years were because they were not "God-centered" in what they accomplished.
 - b) Let me try this concept another way: Go visit a graveyard sometime. If you start reading the gravestones of people, you will see names, years of their birth and years of death. The grave marker may even have a bible verse or some fact about their lives. Now think about what others will think when they see our gravestones: Will they think here is a man or a woman who wasted their lives, or will they think we used our time to make a difference for what is eternal? That is the question that we each must face as we use the time that God has given us in this world.

15. Verse 13: I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.
 - a) Like I said, Solomon was stuck with his gift of wisdom and now probably realized after he spent many years chasing after a good time, foreign women, pleasure and trying to please others, what a waste all of that time was.
 - b) Let me explain Solomon's speech another way: What if we realized that we have wasted a lot of our time? Do we just sit around and regret it like Solomon? We can't go back to say go visit ourselves ten years ago and say, don't do that, it is a waste of time. All we can do is learn from our mistakes and move on. That is what Solomon did at this point in his life. In effect the book of Ecclesiastes is screaming at us, "Learn from my mistakes. Don't repeat them. Even if you have the time and resources that I did, don't waste your life living like I did only trying only to make oneself happy or trying to please say my foreign wives by turning against the God that created us in the first place.
 - c) Am I saying we should not try to make say, our spouses happy? Of course not. I am just saying that God has to come first, even before our relationships with our spouses or even our own children, or our parents our friends. When we are willing to live a God-centered life, He then provides for us the power and the ability to be helpful to those who want us to be helpful to them.
 - d) So what is this verse saying? Having the wisdom to realize how we should live our lives is better than just living for a good time, just having the light to see where one is going is better than living in total darkness. With that said, let us read on.
16. Verse 14: The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.
 - a) The first part of the verse is not being literal. It is a poetic way of saying that those who do seek after God considers his or her time and uses it wisely. At the same time, those who don't care about God just go about doing whatever feels good at that moment.
 - b) John's loose translation of the second phrase: Good people die and bad people die. What good is it to live to make a difference for God if we are just going to die anyway?
 - i) You have to understand that Solomon is trying to reason in "human terms", that is to understand what is the meaning of life and why we should live out our lives.
 - ii) In effect, Solomon is back to "What if this is as good as it gets?" The question is, if there is no God, why should someone try to be a good person to begin with?
 - iii) Solomon's answer is so far, one enjoys life more if one has wisdom, but there is still the "problem" of death and that is the great equalizer of the wise and foolish.
 - iv) That line of reasoning continues in the next few verses. Speaking of which:
17. Verse 15: Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." ¹⁶ For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!
 - a) Again, one has to picture Solomon as a king, with lots of time on his hand to contemplate the meaning of life. He got the idea that God gave him the gift of wisdom. He thought in effect, "OK, great I got this gift. I have the time and money to figure it out. Even if I use my life to make a great difference in the world through the spreading my wisdom or the collecting of many things or building of many things, in the end, I will still die one day. Therefore, I am perplexed about whether or not it is all worth the effort"
 - i) I can just hear the atheist respond with, "There is no god, so go and enjoy the gifts one has and don't worry about your death, but just enjoy the time one has." That's almost a "Don't worry, be happy" type of response to Solomon's dilemma.
 - ii) The problem is that Solomon knew that God existed and realized that it was God that give Solomon those gifts and talents in the first place. Therefore, if I am not honoring him with my talents, what good are they? I am just going to die one day.
 - iii) The conclusion is in effect, if this is all there is, then life IS ultimately meaningless.

- b) The good news of all of this wrestling with the meaning of life will have a positive ending when we finish the book. In the meantime, we are only in Chapter 2 of a 12-chapter book. What Solomon is doing here is pondering what is the point of living? I want to reassure all of us, that a positive conclusion is coming, but it is going to take some time to get there.
 - c) To state that another way, if the answer to the question of, "If this is as good as it gets?" is just this life, then Solomon is right, life is ultimately a waste of time no matter if we have lived a great life or a life for only pleasure. However, Solomon realized that God watches over our lives and that is what makes our lives worth living as we will read and see.
 - d) In the meantime as I stated in the last lesson, Solomon needs a Valium and he is grieving over his fate (death one day) after completing all of these great accomplishments.
18. Verse 17: So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
- a) At this point, Solomon was getting depressed realizing that if this life is all that there is, then no matter what he does, life is ultimately meaningless. I have stated in the past, even an atheist would have to admit that if this life is all that there is, then ultimately (as in the day our world comes to an end) life is ultimately meaningless.
 - b) That is why Solomon used an expression that is translated "chasing after the wind". The idea even in the English language conveys the idea of ultimate meaninglessness.
 - c) If some of this seems repetitive to you, again remember that we are reading poetry. The thoughts are repeated for emphasis. As I promised you, this does get better. Solomon is trying to paint the picture of "ultimate meaninglessness" before he eventually figures out what is the solution to the dilemma of how we should live out our lives. In the meantime, he now considers what will happen to his accomplishments after he dies:
19. Verse 18: I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.
- a) I admit I am fascinated by the fact that Solomon had over 700 wives and 300 concubines and yet the bible records that he only had one son. Grant it, there may have been more, but only one is recorded. That son was to put it simply was a jerk. During the reign of his son, Rehoboam, Israel split into two countries. Solomon's son Rehoboam only ruled over one of the twelve tribes of Israel. A non-family member ruled over all of the other tribes. One can read of the kingdom split in 1st Kings Chapter 12.
 - i) What I wondered is, if Solomon had so many women, where were the children? I suspect but I can't prove that God prevented Solomon from having lots of children as punishment for having all of those women. In other words, the physical issue was with Solomon and not with the women. So why did he have one son if that is true? Because God promised that a descendant of David would rule forever. That is why Solomon was allowed to have one son through all of those marriages.
 - ii) I get the idea I could be totally wrong, but I do wonder why the bible records that Solomon only had one son despite all of those hundreds of marriages. Meanwhile, we have to get back to Solomon contemplating his fate after his death.
 - b) I give that background as in effect, Solomon's worst fears did come true. Despite the fact that Solomon did complete great building projects and had great wealth and wisdom, all of that was lost by the time Rehoboam came on the scene. Part of Solomon's wealth was lost when Solomon started worshipping foreign gods. At that point, God allowed enemies to successfully attack Israel. Much of Solomon's great wealth was also lost to great wars between the two Israelite kingdoms because those two kings fought each other for years.
 - c) Coming back to these verses in Ecclesiastes, Solomon realized that before this son would rule, Solomon had no idea if his son would be a great man or a foolish man. The bible did records that his son, did ignore God and paid the price by fighting wars all of his reign.

- d) Meanwhile, when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, none of these wars had started yet. He was just thinking out loud, what good is having all of this great wealth and accomplishing all of these great works, if I'm going to die one day? I have no idea how my son will act as the next king. Is all of this worth it? Thus, you understand his dilemma here. So with a depressed Solomon writing onward, we keep reading.
20. Verse 20: So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.
- a) Let me suppose for a moment that all of you reading this have children that and you love and want the best for them. Wouldn't you want to leave stuff for them not to remember you, but just so that they can enjoy life more? Assuming Solomon did love his son, why would he be so unhappy that his son of his would inherit all of that wealth? Even if we have no children, there may be a charity that we care about and we give what we have to that charity after we die. Isn't that a good thing to do?
- i) First, yes it is. The point is not about what we leave to our children or our charity. The point is after we die, we don't know what will become of it. We can't know for sure if what we leave behind will be wasted.
- ii) Solomon's problem is not that leaving an inheritance is a bad thing. His problem is that we don't know the future. Because we are going to die, there is nothing that we can do to know for sure that what we have accomplished in our lives will last more than say one lifetime after than.
- iii) But John, you said that archeologists have found what Solomon did do. Modern Israel benefits from tourist spending money to show what he has accomplished. Isn't that a long-term benefit of doing those great works? Yes. However, if there were no next life, Solomon would have no idea that has happened. Even more, we don't know for sure what Solomon is aware of about this life after he died.
- iv) The point is Solomon can't appreciate his works after he died and neither can we. That is the point Solomon is getting at in these verses.
- b) I can summarize Solomon's dilemma with this thought: what good is accomplishing great things if one is not around to appreciate it? Even coming back to my illustration about great athletes who win championships: What good does those awards do if we don't live forever to appreciate those moments of victory? What Solomon is trying to get across is that we have to enjoy life while we can, because after we die, we can't appreciate it.
- i) That doesn't mean we just live for self-gratification. If that was true, then life is truly meaningless. As I like to say, what does one say to a child dying of cancer? What does one say to someone confined to a sick bed all of their lives? Does one just say enjoy life while you can, because this is all that there is? If that is true, as Solomon figured out, life is meaningless, as we can't appreciate whatever it is we have done after we are dead.
- c) Before I move on, let me give the positive news to try to offset all of this pessimism that I have written about over the past few pages. Think of this as a preview of what is to come. If there is a God and living for Him makes a difference for all of eternity, then what we do accomplish for Him has eternal benefits for us to appreciate.
- i) Let me explain this idea another way: When we read of Jesus coming back to life again, He had complete memory recall of his life before he died. That should mean that when we are resurrected, we would remember what happens to us before we die. That would also mean the possibility we can be aware of what happens to the world after our time is up. Even if we can't visit this world again, we will see our loved ones when they are resurrected and they can share the long-term affects of what we have done. My point is serving God gives us benefits that go beyond our lifespan in this world and it is worth the effort to serve Him with our lives.

- d) Since I'm deviating for the moment, let me ask another question: Did Solomon get the idea that Jesus would pay the price for our sins? Don't know. I do believe Solomon did get the idea that a descent of his would be the Promised Messiah. I'm sure David would share that news with Solomon before he ruled as a king. However, with all of Solomon's wisdom, I don't know if he got the concept (so far in the text) that one has to be perfect, by being perfectly forgiven to be with God forever. In effect, that is not the point of the book, so it is not a relevant topic. The main topic of this book is essentially, "Does life ultimately make a difference if there is no God?" That is what Solomon is trying to figure out.
 - i) In the meantime, Solomon is all depressed because he figures that after he dies, no one will appreciate anything he did or anyone else has accomplished. With that depression thought in his mind, we can move on and finish the chapter.
21. Verse 22: What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.
- a) At this point, Solomon is not thinking as a king, but as an average person. The essential point here is that life is hard. One has to work hard to survive. Life is full of problems. Even when we sleep we still struggle because our minds still focus on our problems. The reason Solomon is stating all of this is the reminder that if this life is all that it is, in effect it is cruel of God to give us this type of life to live.
 - b) It would be like an atheist saying, "If God exists, He must be cruel, because the life of most people is hard and it is not fair that most people have to suffer like they do."
 - i) My response would be to say yes you are right. If this is all that there is in life then God is cruel. However, if there is a heaven and the purpose of this life is to figure out that He exists and use our time to make a difference for Him, then life would not be cruel as eternity is infinitely longer than this lifetime. If the purpose of this life is to use it to make a difference for God, then that is a purpose worth living for.
 - c) It may help to explain Solomon's dilemma another way: Solomon got the idea that he had a special gift for wisdom. He was trying to figure out, if I have all of this wisdom, not to mention all of this power, wealth and time, why can't I figure out how to appreciate how to enjoy life? Why is everything ultimately meaningless if this life is all that there is?
 - i) Yes you and I as Christians accept the idea that there is more to life than our time on earth. The problem is nonbelievers wrongly think that one can have complete satisfaction out of this life if they just have the right perspective or accomplish the right things.
 - ii) Solomon is trying to warn everyone what a waste of time it is to think that one can have total satisfaction out of life without God. Even if one has lived the type of life the way that Solomon has, once one is gone, so goes our memory of what we did, if there is no next life. With that said, one can see his dilemma of wondering why should I try so hard to appreciate my life if I am going to die one day.
 - iii) Remember that Solomon is not an atheist and that will become clear in the last few verses of this chapter. Speaking of which:
22. Verse 24: A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?
- a) This is Solomon's conclusion so far: Try to make the best of a bad situation. Yes life in this world can be difficult at times. However, we should try to find as much satisfaction as we can in life. Eat, drink and enjoy life while you can as it may end tomorrow. That is in effect how the world looks at life. The great attitude of enjoy it while you can, because it will be over before you know it. Go out, enjoy entertainment, have fun, go accomplish great things because this is all that there is life. If God exists, then this is the purpose that He made us for, to enjoy life while He can. Of course Solomon is wrong in his conclusion. He's just getting us to understand how to enjoy the time we have on earth.

- b) In effect, this is Solomon's response so far to, "What if this is as good as it gets?" Solomon gives the response of enjoy life while you can as this may be as good as it gets. While he wants us to appreciate the time we have to live, there is also the greater purpose in life of using our time to make a difference for God. We'll get to that, but as I explained earlier, we are only in Chapter 2 of a twelve-chapter book.
 - c) To explain this concept another way, if Ecclesiastes ended here, then the only conclusion would just be, "Don't worry, be happy". That is Solomon's conclusion after two chapters and after living a life that most of us could only dream of having. Yes we should enjoy our lives and appreciate all the good things we have, but we also have to realize there is a greater purpose for living than just to enjoy the time we have. That is what we will study as we go through the rest of this book.
 - d) In the meantime, I still have one more verse to cover in this chapter:
23. Verse 26: To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
- a) To explain this verse, first I need to explain what it is not saying: Godly people will enjoy their lives far more than the ungodly. I have met some very unhappy believers and I have also met some atheists who truly enjoy their lives. That's not the point here.
 - b) The point is those who do seek God, are given the ability to appreciate all that this life has to offer by seeking Him, regularly reading His word and spending time with believers. My point is that God has given us the ability to appreciate life for what it is and we can have both joy and happiness in this life if we do have the right perspective.
 - i) Let me explain it this way: Seeking God does not magically make our problems go away. However, He can give us the eternal perspective to appreciate the good and bad things that we have to face in our lives. For example, if we attend our favorite church service, that does not make our problems disappear. However when we do focus upon God life gets easier to manage when we see it from His perspective.
 - c) That leads to the second part of this verse. It says in effect that those who don't turn their lives over to God are going to give whatever wealth they do have to those of us who do trust in Him. My question is when has that ever happened historically? Never. That is why Solomon did believe in the concept that God will judge the world one day. Solomon does believe that no matter how much the believer sins, if we are trusting in Him for our salvation and not our own ability to please Him, we will be rewarded based on that faith and not our ability to please God by our works. That in effect is the Gospel message. Yes we should live a life based on obedience not to earn our salvation, but only because that is the best way for us to live.
 - d) OK John, hold the happiness for a moment. What about that part of the verse about the ungodly losing all of their stuff. When does that happen? To state the obvious, it must be in the next lifetime, because it never has happened historically.
 - e) We get that part. What about the last line that reads, "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." What Solomon is saying that even if God does somehow fairly give some sort of redistribution of wealth in heaven, how does that affect our lives here and now?
 - i) In other words, Solomon is saying this life we live will still be hard even if there is a heaven where God will make all the wrong things right.
 - ii) So the question becomes what do we do about it now, given the fact that life can be hard at times for all of us? Solomon's sad conclusion to this point in the book is in effect, there is nothing we can do about it. "Deal with it".
 - f) That leads me back to "What if this is as good as it gets?" The answer is deal with it. We can't spend time complaining to a psychologist how bad one's life is, if that is as good as it will ever get. Such people may help put our problems in perspective, but they can't help us unless we want to change our perspective and that is what I mean by deal with it.

24. OK, John, you've just lectured for 10 pages on the fact that we have to appreciate life for what it is because it may never get any better than what it is. Assume we know that, now what?
- a) Consider how one is using one's time. None of us have a guarantee we will live another day. As I write this last page, I just came back from my third funeral this month. The one I went to today was for someone younger than me. If you knew you had exactly, say two more years to live, how would your life be different? Let's assume the only assumption to make about that knowledge is you can't empty your bank account for those final years. How would you want to live your life differently? What would you change knowing that fact and knowing what you know about God? If the answer is nothing, then enjoy one's time and remember that God is judging us based on how we live our lives.
 - i) If there is something different you would do, do it, or at least dedicate some time every day to reach that goal. Even if you don't accomplish that goal, you can die realizing that you worked toward something that you wanted to accomplish in your life before one's time is up.
 - ii) On that not so happy note, I'll end this sad lesson in prayer:
25. Heavenly Father, Help us to remember that the most valuable thing we own in life is our time. Help us to use that time to make a difference for You. Help us to realize how it is that You want us to use that time and help us to use it for things that do matter for all of eternity. We don't know how much time we have left, so guide the time we have for Your glory. May everything we do be used for Your glory so that our time will be as good as it gets. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.