

1. I was torn between two titles for this lesson: It should either be called "Solomon's mid-life crisis" or the simple word "time". After writing most of this lesson, I figured I needed both to describe it.
 - a) When I say "time", this is not just my usual point about the fact that our time on earth is limited and we need to make the most of the time we have. It is also about seeing time from God's perspective and understanding what time is all about. My point is time is a creating thing designed to be used by God to call a group of people to Himself and for us to use our time in order to make a difference for Him in this world.
 - b) As far as Solomon himself, how he is acting fits the classic definition of a mid-life crisis. A mid-life crisis is when one has examined one's life and realized, "My gosh, I've wasted so much time. Let me think carefully about how I should use the time I do have left to live."
 - c) OK John, I think I use my time pretty well and as far as I can tell, I'm not experiencing any sort of mid-life crisis at the moment. Why should I read this lesson? Glad you asked.
 - i) To answer, let us recall a few facts about Solomon: He had tremendous power and wealth. He was probably richer than anyone else at that time in history. He ruled at a time of no wars, so he had the time to consider the purpose of life. He also had a special God-given gift to think about and contemplate life. In this book he wrote for us what is a good use of time and what is a big waste of time. Hopefully, we can all learn to appreciate our time more from reading what Solomon wrote here.
2. With that stated, let me now focus on what Solomon specifically wrote in this book. He is looking back at his life and realized he wasted a lot of time doing things that felt good, but realized those things didn't matter very much. That is why the key word in this book is the word "vanity" (King James Version) or "meaningless" (New International Version as used here) that describes how he saw most of his life to date.
 - a) OK so Solomon is having a midlife crisis. Again, I'm not. Why should I read any further in this book? My answer is that we ourselves may go through one of those times one day and Solomon may teach us how to deal with it. More importantly, Solomon is teaching us about what is and what is not important in life. It is about making the best use of the most important gift God gives us: our time and what matters for all of eternity.
 - b) It's been an interesting coincidence that I have attended three separate funerals in the last month of my life. In each case, the reminder has been how precious time is and knowing what does and does not matter for all of eternity. Once again, it is God putting things in my life that help me relate to what it is He wants me to write about.
3. Now that I've got those statements out of my system, let me discuss where we last left off in this book and where we are going from here. The best description I have read of these two chapters is that Solomon is describing "the monotony of life". Solomon is bored with all of the things he has accomplished that have no eternal ramifications and discusses the futility of it all.
 - a) The lesson for us is if we have accomplished incredible things in our life, what good is it if we never take the time to appreciate them? When we die, we have to give those things to either our living relatives or a charity and we don't know what will become of them.
 - b) Remember that Solomon is focusing on life without having God as the center of one's life. This book and these chapters in particular are asking, what good is living life if one does not desire to please God? Even if one has everything and accomplished everything that one can imagine, it does no good and that is the conclusion Solomon reaches here.
 - c) This statement can summarize both chapters well: "Life has its seasons. Not only do we have to deal with it, but we need to appreciate the valuable time that we have in this life and use that time to make a difference for what has eternal benefits and not just for what makes us feel good at the moment." With that said, I'm ready to start this lesson.

4. Chapter 3 now with a fairly famous poem. You may be familiar with the song "Turn Turn Turn" by the Byrds in 1965. (Written by Peter Seger.) The chorus of that song is first eight verses of this chapter. I mentioned back in my first lesson on this book that the way I knew God wanted me to teach Ecclesiastes is that I heard that song being playing at a coffee shop on the morning I prayed about what book to teach next. My job here is to simply teach what Solomon wrote here without having us think too much about that song. With that tricky task stated, here we go:
5. Chapter 3, Verse 1: There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:
 - a) Solomon's point here is essentially "life goes on". The idea is that God designed our lives to go in cycles. We live in an annual weather cycle of four seasons. There are certain days every year we set aside for holidays and special occasions. The point is God wants us to appreciate the cycles that He has designed for us to live through.
 - b) Let me explain this with another famous cliché: If you don't stop to appreciate life every now and then, it will pass right by you. That is the main point of this section. We need to learn to enjoy and appreciate life as it goes quickly. As I love to state fairly regularly, time is the most precious thing we own. If all we do with our waking hours is work at a job all day, we never will appreciate the wonderful aspects of this world has for us to enjoy. I'm not saying one should just fake being happy even during difficult times. However we do need to appreciate life for what it is, or we will just die missing the beauty of the cycles of time that God has created for us.
 - c) That leads me back to the word translated "season". Of course it includes the idea of the four seasons of the year. It also includes the fact that our life itself can be thought of as one big season. Think of it as from the day we are born until the day we die as one big season. There are also periods of life we go through that can be thought of as seasons.
 - i) OK John, you've just stated the obvious again. Why should I think about this stuff? It is not to magically make all of our problems go away. It is to put whatever it is we have to deal with in life in the perspective of our seasons of life. In effect, this part of the book is designed to help us get through the different seasons of life that we have to deal with, be them good or bad seasons.
 - ii) With that said, it is time to get back to this nine verse, one-sentence poem.
6. Verse 2a: a time to be born and a time to die,
 - a) If you have any doubts that this poem is more than just the seasons of the year, the first half of Verse 2 makes that clear. As I stated earlier, this half of verse is saying that our life cycle itself can be thought of as one big season. Think of it as using our time to appreciate life for what it is, before we die and again never take any time to appreciate it.
 - b) Among the three funerals I attended, one was of a woman I barely knew from my church. She died in mid-life from cancer. The service quoted a blog she wrote that she refused to let cancer win. The point is that she refused to let that horrible disease ruin the time she had left to live and she refused to believe that all there is to life is her fixed time on earth. Again, this comes back to learning to appreciate the time that one has on earth because we never know when that time is going to end.
7. Verse 2b: a time to plant and a time to uproot,
 - a) For those of you who are farmers, you know all too well that there are certain times of the year where crops are planted and when those same full grown crops are taken out of the ground. That is part of the cycle that is being described here.
 - b) Of course one can think of other life cycles here, but hopefully one gets the idea. Again, it comes back to the idea of learning to appreciate the time we have to live and learning to enjoy the different cycles that exist as we live through our lives.
8. Verse 3a: a time to kill and a time to heal,
 - a) The word "kill" does not refer to murder. It refers to warfare. Throughout human history, there have always been times of warfare between groups, tribes and nations. The simple point here is there are times in life that it is necessary as much as we would like it gone.

- b) This verse is not encouraging killing, it is just saying that it exists and it is part of the same cycles of life that has existed throughout history. As hard as that concept is to accept and think about, it is reality. There are also times to heal from such warfare. Such healing is not just physical but mental. The point is just as there is time for such wars to happen, so time is needed for one to both physically and mental heal from such events in one's life.
9. Verse 3b: a time to tear down and a time to build,
- a) Here is another obvious one. One can think of walls, buildings or even relationships. The idea is not to complain about the end of things, but simply to appreciate that the world we live in moves along in cycles. That includes both building and destroying things.
10. Verse 4: a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- a) All of these emotions are appropriate at time and they depend upon our circumstances at any given moment. Since knowing the proper times to laugh and cry are pretty obvious, there is not a lot to add here. With one exception: I have met some Christians who argue that dancing is never appropriate. The word translated dance, means just that. My point is while certain types of dancing may be inappropriate at certain ages or at specific places the idea of dancing itself is a biblically acceptable concept.
11. Verse 5a: a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
- a) To understand why this verse here, it might help to learn a little about rocks and the land of Israel. There is an old Jewish joke that goes, "When God made the earth, he had a few angels in charge of spreading rocks all over it. One of those angels got lazy and dumped his whole bag over Israel." It is a reference to how many rocks are there.
- b) With that in mind, when the Israelites knew they were about to be attacked, they would put stones all over the farms so that the crops would not grow as well. Know that armies needed food to travel and if a farm were full of rocks, they would not produce as much.
- i) The simple point is the idea of "scattering stones" is a reference to spreading them around an area. Gathering them is like picking them up to make a piece of land usable for farming again, or say gathering them to make a fence line. If one lives in a land that is full of rocks, there are times to spread them around and there are times to gather them. That is literal point of this verse.
12. Verse 5b: a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, time to keep and a time to throw away,⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.
- a) From here to the end of this poem within the poem, one gets the idea of understanding about time. The whole idea of these eight verses is that there are times in life where each of these concepts is appropriate to act that way. What one almost instinctively learns as one grows up is when each of these actions or emotions are appropriate and when they are not appropriate to practice.
- b) Let me comment for a moment on the idea of "a time to hate". Doesn't the New Testament clearly teach that the way people know we are Christians is our love for one another? Of course it does. (See John 13:34). So when is it ever appropriate to have hatred if that idea is true? Remember that the bible also teaches that if we love God, we should love what He loves and hate what He hates. A classical expression in Christianity is how much do you hate sin and how much do you love the sinner? The key is not about having hatred of any specific individuals or groups, but hatred of sinful things that people do.
- i) The point is simply that from a biblical standpoint there are appropriate times to express hatred toward someone not for who they are but for what they have done.
- ii) In effect the same can be said for warfare. While one can debate whether or not some wars are appropriate, there are others that are not. When's one life or one's home is being invaded, one can debate war later. At the time when it is time for war and one simply has to accept it as so. Other times one may have to say, we need to attack them over there before the same group can come to us.

- c) The good news is that we have finished the "Byrd's song" and we can move on. Before I do leave the last eight verses, I do want to say something more about Hebrew poetry. In the first lesson I stated in this type of poetry thoughts are connected but the words don't rhyme. In English poetry the last word or the last syllable of one group rhymes with the last word or syllable of the next group. However in this last eight-verse poem within the whole "poetic" book, there is some rhyming in the original Hebrew. Now that you know that bit of trivia, we can move on.
13. Verse 9: What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on men.
- a) To start the next section, it would help to understand these verses in context of the whole book. Solomon here is contemplating time. He is thinking about the fact that everything we do is appropriate in its time and place. He is thinking about how life goes in seasons, be it seasons of the year or seasons of our life. The reason he thought of all this stuff is to ask the question, is life worth it? Are all the things that people do in the seasons of their life a waste of time or are they making a valuable use of the time they are given by God? Solomon doesn't deny God's existence. Solomon is pondering why we do the things we do in the time we have. Like I said, this is Solomon's mid-life crisis.
- b) With that understood, Solomon has finished listing things people do during the different seasons of one's life and now asks the question, what is to be gained from those emotions and actions we do during the different seasons of our lives? That is what Verse 9 is asking. Verse 10 then says in effect, Solomon has lived long enough and seen enough of how most do live out their lives expressing these different things at different times in their lives. The question becomes, what should we be doing with our time, given the seasons of life?
- i) The short answer is to appreciate the time we have as that is all the time we have. That is in effect Solomon's answer in the next few verses. Speaking of which.
14. Verse 11: He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. ¹³ That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God. ¹⁴ I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.
- a) I can sum up these verses by stating the obvious: appreciate life while we can, as this is all the time we get. One can spend one's life complaining about one's problems, or just enjoy it for what it is. To quote one of Dennis Prager, "The miserable never marry the miserable because they may be miserable, but they are not stupid." The point of that expression is that those who like to complain need someone to complain to. If we don't make the time to appreciate life even during the toughest of times, we will never have joy in life.
- b) Verse 12 then says something like, "God created us to understand the concept of eternity, but we as human's can't fathom all that God has done through the course of time."
- i) Atheists will argue that the fact we exist is just an interesting coincidence and yes we should make the best of time, because that is all that we have. However, if God exists and we are accountable to Him, then our perspective of time should change and we can appreciate it more when considering it in the perspective of eternity.
- ii) While atheists will argue because we are not accountable to God, we are free to go do whatever we want, the real question becomes can we be a good person without living in fear of judgment? To state another classical quip: "How many hospitals have been built by atheists as opposed to how many have been built out of a sense that God wants us to help other people?" (Source unknown.)
- c) All of that idea of God's existence and making the best of the time we have leads us to the next three verses (12-14), which state that the most important thing we can do about life is appreciate the time we have here. Nothing goes on forever. That is why there are seasons in our life and people get the idea that our lives and the earth's life do not go on forever.

- d) All of that leads to a key point about Verse 14: It says at the end of the verse, "so that men will revere him". Translation: Our understanding that life only lasts for so long, makes us want to understand why God exists, how are we going to spend eternity and how we live during the seasons of our present life that will matter for all of eternity.
 - e) Solomon's point is that even though many people don't have a good education about how we should prepare for eternity, we instinctively know that our time is limited and if there is more to life than the seasons of our life, we need to think about God and eternity.
 - f) This leads me to a quick discussion about how God judges us. The simple version is that God says to us, is that how you want to live now? Great, you will live that way for all of eternity. You want to reject Me now, great it will continue for eternity. If we want to use our lives to make a difference for God, He promises to continue that concept eternally.
 - i) So where does Jesus come into all of this? That comes back to the idea that if God is perfect, then we need to be perfect in order to spend eternity with a perfect God. We can either never sin once, or we can be perfectly forgiven of all our sins.
 - ii) To state it another way, I wouldn't want to stand before God and tell him, look what a good life I have lived. You must let me in heaven because my good deeds are better than my bad deeds. The problem with grading us on a curve is that we never know what is the cut off standard for that curve. However, if we do accept the idea of perfection, we can accept the idea of being perfectly forgiven.
 - iii) So if we are perfectly forgiven, why be a good person? It is not to earn our way into heaven, but because that is the best way to live out our lives. It is the concept of living out of gratitude for what God has done for us (forgiven us) as opposed to trying to prove our worth to Him. That is part of the Gospel message.
 - g) Gee John, that is nice and I know all of that. What does it have to do with these verses? The whole point of this section is that we should appreciate the time we have to live and use it in effect to give glory to God. Again not out of necessity, but out of gratitude.
 - h) That, I believe is Solomon's point as he goes through his mid-life crisis.
15. Verse 15: Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.
- a) My loose translation: Life goes on, nothing really changes and we are all accountable to God with our lives. (Now if that isn't a mid-life crisis statement, I don't know what is.)
 - b) So, is Solomon right here? Is there anything new that ever really happens? Yes we have new technology that was unheard of a century ago. However, I believe what Solomon is referring to is, human nature. The good and bad deeds done by humans do not change over the millenniums. People's basic need to find a purpose and meaning in life has not changed. What also has not changed is the fact the vast majority of people around the world do believe in the existence of God and a majority do believe we are accountable to Him for our lives. We may or may not want to think about these things, but that does not prevent them from being a reality.
 - c) OK John, you are depressing me here. What should I get out of this? If life goes on as it always does, what do I do about it? In effect nothing. This is the classical prayer that we can only fix what we can fix and let go of things we can't fix. We ask God to give us the wisdom to know the difference. (Paraphrased, based on the Al-Anon serenity prayer.)
 - d) OK then, what should I do? That brings me back to the issue of time. Time is the most valuable thing we have. We should apply wisdom how to use that time. That is what Solomon is figuring out through this letter. Solomon is saying that despite the fact that life goes on, we are still accountable to God, so use your time wisely. With that hope of something positive added, I am ready to move on.
 - e) Speaking of God and judgment, I present Verse 16, as Solomon continues along this same line of reasoning:

16. Verse 16: And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment--wickedness was there, in the place of justice--wickedness was there. ¹⁷ I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."
- a) John's loose translation: Solomon didn't see proper justice being practiced on earth. He believes we need to wait for eternity in order for there to be true justice practiced.
 - b) For what it is worth, I have spent a good amount of time in courtrooms working as an expert witness. I usually don't hang around to see the ending, but my experience has been that it is a "crapshoot" at best. My point is often justice does not get done, but it just comes down to what lawyers make the best arguments or do the best convincing that day.
 - c) So if eternity is well eternity, what does it matter if justice is given out for the relatively short time span of this world? How is it fair to punish someone forever, for whatever it is they or we have done in this relatively short time span? For starters, like I said earlier, I would argue that heaven or hell is giving people what they want: Either eternity in the presence of God or eternity without His presence. My second response is essentially that we can't get away with anything. The idea of a judgment gives me peace to know that the sins we commit will be judged fairly. Christianity does not say we are innocent. It is God saying to us in effect, "Jesus has already paid the price for your sins. We are perfect only because we are perfectly forgiven."
 - d) Let me try this one more way: When I learn of children dying young, I think about how unfair that is to them. When I read of people innocently killing others or about those who die simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the only way that I can let it go is to accept the idea that God will judge all people fairly. Do I fully comprehend how that will work? No I don't. But I refuse to accept the idea that people will get away with stuff for all of eternity based on the evil deeds that people have committed in their lifetime.
 - e) That leads me to the question and issue of "annihilationism". That is the belief that when we die, we just cease to exist. Why doesn't that happen? My answer is how would that be fair if we just cease to exist? I would rather live a life under the assumption that God will judge all people fairly then try to live with the thought that when we die we just cease to exist. OK then, what if you are wrong and the atheists are right? That is what atheists do argue, that when we die, we just cease to exist. My response is how can atheists explain how our world came out of nothing? How can atheists explain how thirty percent of the bible is predictions made centuries before they were fulfilled? There is too much evidence that can't be explained if we just cease to exist. That is why 96% of the world's population correctly believes that our lives must be more than we experience in this lifetime.
 - f) Gee John, that is all wonderful and I'm glad that you and I agree that God exists and He will judge the world one day. What does it have to do with the verses? Everything. The point is Solomon also realized that God would judge the world one day. Remember that he did spend many years of his life living in excess and ignoring God. Now that Solomon is going through his mid-life crisis, and having the gift of wisdom, he is remembering that it is God who gave him that gift in the first place and He is the one who will determine his eternal destiny based on how he lived out his life.
 - g) All right then, Solomon is realizing that he has wasted much of his life and he realized the fact that God will judge him based on how he lived. How does any of that affect me?
 - i) The answer comes back to my other title for this lesson: Time. On one hand, if we are going to live forever, we have literally all the time in the world to use our time to make a difference for God. I don't know what we do all day in heaven, but I'm trusting in the fact it won't be boring and somehow we use our eternal time for His glory there just as we should do here. So if the purpose of this life is to prepare us for life in heaven, that means we should start now using the time God has given us in order to make a difference for Him. How? Hang on, we're coming to that.

17. Verse 18: I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹ Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"
- a) Speaking of great time wasters (i.e., vanity or meaningless), Solomon is now thinking of the eternal fate of both humans and animals. Solomon is pondering that if we do have the spirit of God in us, what about animals: do they have that spirit too?
 - b) When animals die, they just cease to exist. That means their existence is annihilated to use that same, fancy word as I used a half page back. That leads to the question of whether or not there are animals in heaven. Billy Graham gave an answer that may satisfy some: "If you believe you need your favorite pet to be with you forever, then I trust in God to make that possible for you." All I (John) can do is study the evidence I believe is God inspired, that is the bible itself. I believe the only mention of any heavenly-based animals is when it says Jesus returns riding on a white horse and the saints (believers) return with Him also on horses. (Revelation 19:11 and 14.) Therefore I assume in heaven, we will get lessons on how to ride horses, as they must exist there.
 - c) OK, I admit I'm getting weird here and off course. Solomon's point in these verses is just that when our lives on earth ends, it ends, just like it does for animals. He is not thinking in biblical terms, but just in human thoughts. His point is without a belief in God, we can never know for sure who is and who is not saved. Without a trust in the God to guide our lives, we would just be annihilated like say an insect that dies.
 - i) Solomon's answer that he may or may not have figured out, is the idea that if God is perfect, then we have to be perfect to be with Him forever. That's why we do preach the Gospel: So we can be eternally perfect by being perfectly forgiven.
 - ii) As to whether or not animals get resurrected, that is God's problem and not ours. Let me put it this way: If God created this world, it is His world. Who are we to say to Him, this person or this animal should spend eternity with You, while that person or that animal should not. If we accept the idea that He is in charge of the world, we have to let Him be in charge and live how He wants us to live and not what we want to live.
 - iii) OK then, if God is in charge of my life and my time, what do I do next? Ask Him. Pray something like, God I don't know what it is that You want me to do with my life, but if my time is Your time, make it obvious to me how You want me to use it.
 - iv) I find that God can't resist when we are willing to turn our lives over to Him. He makes it obvious to us over time, how it is He wants us to use the time He does give us to not only live, but to make a difference for Him in this world.
 - v) Meanwhile, I only have one more verse to go Chapter 3.
18. Verse 22: So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?
- a) For this verse, let me focus on the word "work". Does that mean every one of us has to go run out and get a job, no matter what is our age or health status? No it doesn't. This verse is Solomon's way of answering the question that I asked at the end of verse 17: "what is it God wants us to do?" The answer is the work that He has called each of us to fulfill.
 - b) I heard an interesting quote the other day I want to share here: God would rather there be one million separate "one dollar" men and women making a difference for Him than say a single "one million dollar" man or woman. While we may admire what someone like Billy Graham has accomplished for God, I am convinced He would rather there be millions of people with only a little knowledge about God being willing to be used by Him then one special person with a great talent. In other words, each of us need to start working now to make a difference for Him and He will give us what we need to do what He calls us to do.

- c) All of that leads me back to this verse. The point is don't worry if we don't have all that we need to be a great "whatever" in life. Do what one believes God is calling one to do or take and make the time to work toward that goal. Further, we need to enjoy whatever it is that God has called us to do, as in effect this time is all the time we have on earth. To put it simply, enjoy what time one has as it is the only time one has.
- d) With that said, I'm ready for the next chapter as it falls along the same line of reasoning.
19. Chapter 4, Verse 1: Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed-- and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors-- and they have no comforter. ² And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive.
- a) Solomon in all of his wealth, power and time to kill, was still very much aware that there are many people in the world that are oppressed by others. I'm guessing that he hears the stories of slaves that were in his household about the trouble of their lives. I'm sure with all the wealth that Solomon had, he must have heard many sob stories of people begging him for money thinking that would fix whatever problem they had at that moment.
- b) So, does Solomon give to everyone who asks, or just ponders the problem? I think that he realized that even if he gave away all that he had, such oppression of some over others is still going to be a problem that is beyond Solomon's ability to fix.
- c) The one point that Solomon does realize is true that those who are already in heaven must be happier than those who are still living, but are being oppressed somehow. The point is not that Solomon is saying all dead people are in heaven. Solomon's point is that when he sees people suffering, he realizes those who have died no longer have to go through all of that suffering that he sees others going through.
- d) The question essentially comes back to, "what do we do and what can we do about all the evil that occurs in this world?" I am reminded of the expression, "All it takes for evil men to win is for good men to do nothing". Yes it is up to us to make a difference in the world, but it is also up to us to rely upon His power in order to make that difference. That is how each of us can be the million "one dollar" men and women that God desires we be. This is about letting go of our desires and saying to God, I believe I know what it is You want me to do with my life, but I can't do it without Your power and Your guidance. Help me to use what You have given me to start here and now and trust You to make that difference.
- e) Meanwhile while we may feel better knowing that God can lead us to do what it is He has called us to do, Solomon is still busy contemplating the fate of the suffering:
20. Verse 3: But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.
- a) Well if Solomon was not depressed enough in the previous verses thinking about those in life who are oppressed, he now focuses on those yet to be born. Solomon says that people who have not been born yet, don't realize how much evil there is this world. The fact that the unborn don't realize this yet, means that they are better off.
- i) Think about a newborn baby: They don't know about all the problems that exist in this world. They just have to be dependant upon their parents to take care of their needs. So is Solomon saying it is better to be naïve then to realize all the problems that exist in the world? No. I think his point is to realize all the bad things that do happen in this world are there, and money and time won't solve them. There was oppression back then and oppression exists today.
- ii) So what is the solution? It is about doing something. Again, the way evil triumphs over good are when good people simply fail to act. The way to bring oppression to an end is to be part of the multitude of men and women who rely upon His power to do something and let Him guide us to make that difference. Where do we start? Again, it comes back to asking Him what it is how it is that He wants us to use our lives. Let Him answer that question His way on His timing. He will.

21. Verse 4: And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
- a) The next thing Solomon realized is what drives a lot of people to achieve success in life is because they get envious of others around them. It's kind of like "I see my neighbor has a house that is bigger than mine, so I'll work harder for me to get that bigger house."
 - b) What Solomon is describing is the 10th of the "10 Commandments". Let me list it here: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."
 - i) The word "covet" means to desire what it is not yours. We tend to think of this command, as about not stealing or think about stealing. However, there already is a command against stealing. Why is the desire of one's neighbor's stuff bad? After all, if seeing a neighbor with a new whatever, desires us to work hard in order to have that same thing, isn't that a good thing? However Solomon calls that "vanity" or "meaningless" as it says here in the New International Bible version.
 - ii) To answer, one has to separate human desire from God's desire. Working hard in order to support one's self or one's family is a part of life and not a bad thing. If we are motivated out of envy of our neighbor or whoever, that is the problem.
 - iii) What Solomon is saying is that life without living to please God is meaningless. We can work hard and possibly achieve success by human standards. So what? We will still die and have to leave our stuff to someone else. The reason God gave us that 10th commandment and Solomon is commenting upon it in this verse, is to remind us what a waste of a life one has if one's only motivation to be successful is to have what others around us may have. I'm not telling us to give away all of our stuff to the first person who asks or say, our church. I'm saying the motivation for us to work hard is to make a difference for God with our lives.
 - iv) This comes back to the issue of time. If time is the most valuable thing we own in this lifetime, then how are we using it? Are we using our time to glorify God with our lives or just acquire more stuff? That is what Solomon is warning against.
22. Verse 5: The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.
- a) In Verse 4, the focus was on the person who works hard because he or she wants what his or her neighbor has. In Verse 5, we have the opposite problem: The lazy person. This is describing a person who doesn't care about God (in the bible, that is what a "fool" is) and in effect, lives off of the efforts of others, as they are too lazy to work themselves.
 - i) Time for some standard disclaimers: If one is too sick to work, I'm not condemning that problem. If one is dealing with a tragedy at the moment, God does not expect you to run back to work. If one is seriously looking for a job, and one is depending upon others while one is looking, that is not the issue here.
 - ii) This is about those who think, I'm not going to go work for someone else, but I'm just going to be lazy all day and depend upon others to take care of me. That too, is a waste of a human life and that is Solomon's point here.
 - b) There is a classical expression among Christian missionaries that says, "Give a man a fish, and the next day he will be hungry again. Teach him how to fish, and he can take care of himself in the future." As Christians we should help those in need. The best way to help those in need is to help them so they can eventually take care of themselves. Do I give of everyone that asks of me? Of course not. There are times God does call on me to give to others and I try to let Him lead me when to and when not to help. Recently a woman told me how she keeps a small supply of food in her car to give to people who beg of her, but she never gives them cash. Some accept it and some won't. The point as it relates to this verse is that God wants us to show compassion to the less fortunate, but at the same time realize what a waste of a life one has if one is not willing to try to work in the first place in order to support him or herself and make a difference with their lives.

23. Verse 6: Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.
- Let's begin by thinking about this verse in context. Verse 4 focused on people who work hard due to envy of neighbors around them. Verse 5 focused on those who gave up in life and refused to make an effort to work hard to make a difference for their lives. That leads us to Verse 6, which is in the middle of the two extremes: The point is, it is better to work hard and enjoy what one has, instead of killing oneself working oneself to death.
 - To say it another way, there is nothing wrong with hard work. It becomes a problem if that becomes the sole driving force of one's life and one never takes the time to enjoy it. If one is envious of say, one's neighbor and works oneself "to death" in order to have what they have, one is wasting one's life. It is important to state that God is not anti-success. He is against literally working ridiculous hours killing ourselves and say ignoring our families and ignoring Him in order to work that hard. It is like the classical expression of "working smarter not harder".
 - Of course hard work is necessary in order to succeed in life. If one is not balancing that hard with taking the time to appreciate life, it will literally pass us by and all of our hard work won't make a difference in the long run. That is what this verse is teaching. All of that leads to a story that Solomon tells in the next few verses:
24. Verse 7: Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: ⁸ There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless-- a miserable business!
- The short version here is that Solomon came to the same conclusion that I did in Verse 6 about working so hard that one never enjoys one's life. I don't know if Solomon is talking about himself or someone else. Solomon did have an older brother who died right after he was born (the first baby of David and Bathsheba from 2nd Samuel Chapter 14.) The bible records that Solomon had a son, but I don't know if he had that son at this point in his life. Bottom line is Solomon could be talking about himself and all he accomplished in his building projects, or he could be talking about someone else or had made up a story.
 - Solomon's point is in effect, the same one that I made earlier. If all one does in life is work hard and say, accomplishes great wealth or great whatever, what good is all of that stuff if one never takes the time to enjoy it all. I have met people in the business world who live to get the next deal done. They never really stop to appreciate life because they focus all of their time and energy on that next deal. Again, I'm not anti-success or hard work. I'm just saying if one never stops to appreciate life, it will pass right past us. That is Solomon's point here as well.
 - OK John, you can stop beating that point over our heads now. Why does Solomon refer to someone who doesn't have a son or brother here? His point is that whoever is achieving all of this success has no one to leave it to. This successful person can't share the wealth he or she has with members of his own family. If one sacrifices to develop a relationship with one's family for that success, then one has already failed if we realize it or not. With that depressing thought finished, let's move on.
25. Verse 9: Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:
- From here, Solomon moves on to talk about the importance of friendship. I heard a cute quote recently on friendship that I liked: "Develop at least six good friends during one's lifetime. That way you have friends to carry your casket at your funeral." While that is a bit morbid, it does make the point about the importance of developing friends. That can and should include one's spouse if one is married. The idea is that life is tough enough to live by ourselves. Having another person or group to share our lives with through good and bad times helps us with our struggles and gives us someone to share our joys with during the times we can celebrate our achievements in life.

26. Verse 10: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
- a) These verses are pretty self-explanatory. They give simple examples of the problems of being alone in one's life and the advantage of having friends around us.
 - b) Let me speak for a moment to those who are feeling lonely at this point. There are times when all of us desire to be alone and there is nothing wrong with that. One of my wives' best friends who I know has a number of good friends likes to go the movies by herself at times, as that is her way of taking a break. Let's suppose that one does not have any close friends at this point in one's life. Where does one start? Start by doing things or going to places that one enjoys. Pray for God to bring friends into one's life that we can minister to and they in turn can minister to us. As another example, many larger churches organize functions for single people. The point is one can develop friendships just by making an effort and trusting God to help us develop those friends. The related idea is not to overwhelm a potential friend, but give time for that relationship to develop.
 - i) This reminds me of the classical expression, "People want what they can't have and don't want what they can have". My point is the way to fail at any type of a relationship is to overwhelm others with oneself. A healthy relationship is when both are willing to work to make that relationship better.
 - c) Believe it or not, this leads me right back to these verses. Notice the phrase in Verse 11 that says if two lie together they keep warm (shared body heat). It is harder for enemies to attack us if we stand together. The point is it is worth the time to develop relationships be it martial or just friendships. Yes it is hard at times and yes our friends will disappoint us just as we will disappoint them. A good friendship is one where we are willing to love each other just by being willing to listen to them and help them without overwhelming them. I have found those who don't develop good friendships is usually because they try to overwhelm people with their own issues and not do enough "give and take".
 - d) Let me tie all of this to my double lesson titles of "Solomon's mid life crisis" and "time". I don't know if Solomon was feeling lonely even with his 700 wives and 300 concubines. I do suspect that even though Solomon had it all, he too felt lonely and even with all that he had he didn't feel close to any one person. The bible never describes Solomon having any close friends the way his father David did with Jonathan. I could be wrong, but I suspect that Solomon was feeling sorry for himself at this point in his life. Solomon realized that he had a need for a "special someone" to share his life with as opposed to just being this powerful king that had all the riches that one can imagine.
 - e) Now that Solomon is getting older, he too is realizing that his time on earth is limited. He is thinking about the time he has left and what really matters in life. What does matter is taking the time to enjoy one's work as well as taking the time to enjoy those who are close to you, be it family and or friends. I believe that is Solomon's conclusion here.
 - f) Speaking of conclusions, we have a few more verses left to finish this lesson.
27. Verse 13: Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. ¹⁴ The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. ¹⁶ There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor.
- a) Solomon ends this section with another story. If you recall from a few verses back, he told a story about someone who achieved great success in life, but never took the time to enjoy his success. In this story (assumedly made up), Solomon talks about being a king who is so set in his ways he refuses to listen to advice. He compares this "old foolish king" to a young man who had nothing, but rose from being in prison to being a king.

- b) It is possible that Solomon was thinking about his father's humble beginnings to rising to be a king. It could even describe Joseph from the book of Genesis. I don't think who is being described here as important as the contrast between a young struggling person who has the gift of wisdom compared to an old king who refuses to use common sense.
 - c) I believe the point is simply that those people willing to submit their lives to God will be raised up eternally and possibly in this life and such a person is greater than one who is established as a king, but refuses to listen to anyone.
 - i) In some ways, I think Solomon is describing himself. 2nd Kings Chapter 11 states that he wasted many years of his life with foreign women and building temples to the gods that they worshipped. I think that he saw himself as the old foolish king who wasted a lot of his life with things that don't matter for all of eternity.
 - ii) Solomon realized it was better to be a young, lowly person who appreciates where the gift of wisdom comes from (God) and uses it for His glory than to have great power and wealth and not be willing to listen to anyone let alone God.
 - iii) That is why Solomon's conclusion to the whole matter is the last half of Verse 13:
28. Verse 13b: This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
- a) What is meaningless to Solomon is having everything one can possibly imagine and then letting all of that stuff dominate one's life to the point where one cannot even appreciate it or give God the glory for what one has in life.
 - b) OK John, I don't have everything one can imagine and I believe in God. Why should I care about any of this stuff? The answer comes back to my dual title for this lesson: Time, and going through a mid-life crisis. All of us needs to examine our own lives occasionally and think about whether or not what we are doing in this or that area of our lives is pleasing to God based on the way we are living. Again, time is the most valuable thing we own. The big question is, if we knew we only had say, one more year to live, and let's say we can't empty our life savings, how would we live differently and use the time we have left? Hopefully, the answer to that question won't leave us "chasing the wind".
 - c) With that convicting but hopefully positive thought in mind, let me close in prayer:
29. Our Father, You are in charge of our lives. You know all things, including what it is You would like us to pray for and what it is You would like us to accomplish with the time You have given us in this world. Help us to use that time to make a difference for You. Help us to change what it is we can change, to let go of what we can't change and provide for us Your wisdom to know the difference. Help us to rely upon Your power and not our own to use that time. Be with us today as we live to make a difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.