

**Mid-America Conference on Preaching (October 18–19, 2007)**  
**Preaching Workshops**

**AN OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES**

Robert V. McCabe, Th.D.  
 Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

I. The Message of Ecclesiastes

A. Life in a Sin-cursed World Cannot Be Fully Comprehended by Man.

To demonstrate that life in a sin-cursed world cannot be fully comprehended by man is the subject of Ecclesiastes, I will attempt to demonstrate this by examining the recurring theme emphasizing this and its development through the polarity of themes.

1. The subject of the book is found in the recurring theme emphasizing the enigmatic nature of life in a sin-cursed world.

The author reflects his frustration with trying to understand the meaning and purpose of life through his use of the Hebrew term *hebel*.

- a. This Hebrew word is translated in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, and ESV as “vanity.” The TEV deviates from this pattern by translating it as “useless” and the NIV does likewise with its rendering as “meaningless.” The NASB translates *hebel* as “vanity” 22 times, “futility” 12 times, “fleeting” twice, and “emptiness” once. The HCSB renders this word with some form of “futility” 35 times and “fleeting” in the remaining three examples. The NET BIBLE renders *hebel* with “futile” or an equivalent 21 times, with the other 17 renderings ranging anywhere from “fleeting” (6:12; 7:15; 9:9 [twice]; 11:10) to “useless” (7:6), to name only a few examples.

*Hebel* is used 73 times in the Old Testament and 38 (or 37 depending on a possible textual problem in 9:9) of these uses are found in the book of Ecclesiastes. It is used five times at the inception of this work in 1:2 and three times at its conclusion in 12:8. In these two verses the author declares that everything is *hebel*. This word is echoed throughout the book at significant junctures in 29 other cases (1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9 [2 times]; 11:8, 10). Because of its prominent position at the beginning and end of the book as well as its repetition, this is the book’s subject.

- b. The lexical entry of *hebel* is “vapor” or “breath.” In Ecclesiastes it is being used in a metaphorical sense.

- 1) Is Solomon’s use of this term showing us that man’s life and work is *vain*, i.e., worthless? If this is the case, then its translation as “vanity” is certainly appropriate since our English term generally denotes that which is futile or worthless. However, if this is the case, how can Solomon legitimately tell us to enjoy our food, drink, labor, wife, etc.?

- 2) If use of a word has any significance in reflecting meaning, then we must examine how it is used in this book.
- a) An example of its use at a significant juncture is 8:14. In this section Solomon is describing how a wise man cannot understand how God administers justice. In v. 14 he describes how there are times when a righteous man receives what a wicked man deserves and a wicked man receives what a righteous man deserves. To this, he says, “This too, I say, is *hebel*.” In this context, he clearly cannot mean that life is *absolutely meaningless* because in the preceding two verses, he states that in the final analysis the righteous and the wicked will ultimately receive what they deserve. In this regard a *hebel* situation is something that is an enigma, it is hard to comprehend.
  - b) In a number of contexts *hebel* is qualified by the expression “chasing after the wind,” (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9; this is translated in KJV as “vexation of spirit”). When one chases after the wind, he is attempting to bring it under his control in order that he may guide it to blow in a specific way. When we see that Solomon has put *hebel* in juxtaposition with “chasing after the wind,” he is apparently indicating that a situation that is characterized as being *hebel* is one that is beyond man’s normal ability to control. Therefore, this denotes our frustration when we are confronted with certain difficulties that are puzzling to us. It does not suggest that life has no value.
  - c. In concluding this brief discussion about *hebel*, we should have some concern about taking it in the sense of “vanity,” “meaningless,” “useless,” “futility,” or the like. I would prefer translating it as “enigma” or “incomprehensible.” In 1:12–6:9 Solomon has studied various areas of life such as labor, wisdom, righteousness, riches, honor, pleasure, and the like. He has concluded that none of these give man the ultimate advantage in life. They all have limitations. None of these provide the key for finding lasting value and meaning in life. None of these provide an answer on how to live in a sin-cursed world. In 6:10–11:6 Solomon gives some practical advice on how to live in light of man’s inability to understand God’s past or future work. Expressions such as “who knows what is good for man” and “who will tell man what will be after him” dominate this final section. This section reflects that finite man is unable to figure out what is going on around him and what will be in the future. In 1:12–11:6, Solomon echoes many times that life the meaning of life is elusive. In light of this, we should understand 1:2 and 12:8 as describing the subject of his discourse. Life in a sin-cursed world is definitely incomprehensible. This was Solomon’s subject.

From this we should conclude that Solomon has made a study about understanding meaning and purpose of life in a sin-cursed world. He has

demonstrated that none of these facets of God's world provide the key to living a meaningful and productive life. Because finite man lives in a sin-cursed world, life is frustrating and we cannot fully comprehend what God is doing. From man's vantage point, life in this sin-cursed world was incomprehensible to Solomon and is equally puzzling to us.

2. The subject of the book is also found in its polarity of themes reflecting the enigmatic nature of life in a sin-cursed world.
 

The polarity of themes such as birth and death, war and peace, etc. (see 3:1–8) reproduces the character of this world. It is a world filled with tension.

  - a. The key tension is between life and death. In 7:1 Solomon states that the day of death is better than the day of birth; however, in 9:4–6 he states that any one who is living has hope and that a living dog is better than a dead lion. On the one hand, he hates life (2:17); on the other hand, he commends its enjoyment (2:24–26). This reflects a life that is filled with tensions and distortions.
  - b. Why is the world like this? This is apparently because finite man has been victimized by the Fall. For Solomon to have this type of theological understanding, it means that he would have been very conversant with the Book of Genesis. Some studies have been done to support this contention. We should take note of some of the comparisons between Ecclesiastes and Genesis. The theme question in 1:3 is in terms of man's original mandate to subdue the earth and rule over it (Gen 1:28; 2:5, 15). Furthermore, man was made from dust and will return to dust (cf. Eccl 3:20; 12:7 with Gen 2:7; 3:19); man was designed for companionship (cf. Eccl 4:9–12; 9:9 with Gen 1:27; 2:21–25); man has a bend toward sin (cf. Eccl 7:29; 8:11; 9:3 with Gen 3:1–13; 4:7); human knowledge has God-given limitations (cf. Eccl 8:7; 10:14 with Gen 2:7); and God is sovereign over all creation (cf. Eccl 3:10–13; with Gen 1:28–30; 3:5). These correlations with Genesis strongly suggest that Solomon recognizes that man is finite and that he lives in a sin-cursed world.

#### B. Life in a Sin-cursed World Can Be Judiciously Enjoyed by Man.

In the midst of a sin-cursed world where finite man must acknowledge that he cannot fully comprehend how God is working, Solomon exhorts his audience that God has given man some privileges that he can judiciously enjoy. In developing this enjoyment of life motif, we will initially look at its **significance**, followed by the **foundation** of the exhortation, and finally by the **motivation** for the exhortation.

1. The Significance of the Exhortation to Judiciously Enjoy Life Is Demonstrated by its Repetition.
 

The significance of this exhortation is demonstrated by the fact that it is repeated numerous times and in each of these Solomon reflects that this is God's gift for man. This exhortation is repeated in 2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9. A glance at each of these passages reveals that Solomon challenges us to enjoy our food, drink, work, spouse, youth. Some have claimed that this is no

more normative for us than Satan's lie in Genesis 3:4. However, against this we should notice that in the last part of 2:24, he said "this also I saw, that it was from the hand of God." In the context of this verse, we can see that he is saying that his food, beverage, and labor are gifts from God. Solomon has also made this same statement in 3:13, 22; 5:18–19; 8:15; and 9:9. I would conclude from this that Solomon designed his advice to be normative.

2. The Foundation of the Exhortation to Judiciously Enjoy Life Is One's Relationship to God.

The exhortation to judiciously enjoy life is restricted by the fact that only believers can genuinely celebrate life. Solomon stresses that God has enabled only certain ones to enjoy God's gifts. These people are those who please Him in 2:25–26 and those who fear Him in 8:14. These are two expressions that Solomon uses to refer to a genuine believer. To see this emphasis we will briefly look at 2:25. If you have a KJV the text reads "For who can eat, or who else can hasten *hereunto*, more than I." If we compare this with either NASB or NIV, in place of "more than I" these versions have "without Him." These two versions reflect the better reading of the Hebrew text. The point in this verse is quite significant. In v. 24 Solomon has advised that man needs to enjoy his food, drink, and labor. This is what God has designated for man. However, this does not apply to all men for he reflects in v. 25 that food, drink, and labor cannot be enjoyed "without Him." His point is that without God, no one can find pleasure in his food, drink, or work. Only when one is properly related to the Sovereign God is this type of appreciation possible.

3. The Motivation for the Exhortation to Judiciously Enjoy Life Is the Judgment of God.

Some have argued that Solomon's advice to enjoy life is tantamount to the Epicurean sense of despair, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The restriction of this advice is the judgment of God. Since the author sets forth this motivation a number of times so clearly, we should understand that he did not have this type of philosophy. This theme is stated in 3:14, 9:1, 11:9, and in 12:14. Solomon appears to use this to temper one from becoming excessive in his enjoyment of life. This is expressed quite clearly in 11:9. "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see." This might be misunderstood as support for a hedonistic lifestyle; however, this is not the case, for the last part of this verse reads: "But know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment." The point is to enjoy life, but keep it within the God-given boundaries. Solomon's enjoyment motif is balanced by the judgment of God that is predicated on God's commandments.

Simply stated, Solomon's advice is this: Life in a sin-cursed world can properly be enjoyed when one has a vital relationship with the sovereign God who holds mankind accountable.

Solomon ties everything together in the conclusion of his work (12:8–14). In v. 8 he restates his subject, “life is an enigma.” In vv. 9–11, he reminds us that he was a wise man and studied out the issues of life. What he has advised is right because ultimately it was given to him by the One Shepherd, God. This is to say, his advice about enjoying life comes from God. He reminds us then in vv. 13–14, that we are to fear God and be obedient; something that only a believer can hope to do, and that we are accountable for our actions to God. Solomon’s point in this book is that life in a sin-cursed world can properly be enjoyed when one has a vital relationship with the sovereign God who holds mankind accountable.

We can compare Solomon’s discourse with a puzzle, he has studied many pieces of the puzzle such as labor, wisdom, righteousness, riches, honor, pleasure, youth, and the like. He has also studied those parts of the puzzle that relate to decision-making and the will of God. None of these provided the ultimate satisfaction or the ultimate satisfying answers to life’s tough questions. God has not given man all the pieces to the puzzle. However, his ultimate solution was not in having all the pieces of the puzzle but knowing the Author of the puzzle. Only when one comes to know God is he able to enjoy the puzzle of life as designed by its Author. Life in a sin-cursed world can properly be enjoyed when one has a vital relationship with the sovereign God who holds mankind accountable.

## II. Annotated Outline of Ecclesiastes

### A. Introduction: A Contrast Between Finite Man and a Cyclical, Enduring Cosmos, 1:1–11

1. Introductory Title, v. 1
2. Introductory Poem, vv. 2–11

This opening poem serves as an introduction to the whole book. As such its first two verses not only serve as an introduction to the poem but to the book as a whole. The book’s subject is given in v. 2 and its programmatic question is stated in v. 3. The actual poem is in vv. 4–11. In it Solomon grapples with the question of man’s ultimate advantage. He describes the subject of human frustration in comprehending the created order of the cosmos. There is a contrast here between man as a temporary resident on the earth and the cyclical, enduring nature of the earth. Though man can see the nature of the earth, he cannot comprehend the significance of it, it is beyond man’s ability to understand.

### B. First Discourse: Observations on Various Areas of Life in Order to Demonstrate Finite Man’s Lack of Ultimate Gain, 1:12–6:9

Solomon investigates various areas of life in which finite man is involved. This reflection indicates that the achievements made by mortal man have no lasting value. These demonstrate man’s failures and limitations. This extended section is unified through the repetition of the phrase “enigmatic, a chasing after the wind.” With the exception of 4:4 where it introduces a new unit, this phrase is located as a concluding part for several sections. Consequently, it shows Solomon’s conclusions about the worth of human achievement (1:16–18; 2:12–17), pleasure seeking (2:1–11), and labor along with its fruits (2:18–6:9). None of these provide man with the ultimate gain.

1. Finite Man's Lack of Ultimate Gain in This Life Is Reflected by Personal Observations on Various Life Situations, 1:12–3:22.

The content of 1:12–3:22 focuses on what occurred in Solomon's personal life.

a. Finite Man's Lack of Ultimate Gain in This Life Is Reflected by Personal Observations on Human Achievement and Wisdom, 1:12–2:26.

Solomon as he pictures himself to his readers is one who cannot obtain this quest for ultimate gain. He wants to see life's purpose and meaning but he cannot acquire this information. Though pictured as failing and limited, man is not hopeless as the conclusion demonstrates. This section is brought to a conclusion by a repetition of the question about man's ultimate gain in 2:22–23 that is then followed by Solomon's positive advice. This section of material can be broken down in this manner:

1) Man's Failures and Limitations in Striving after Wisdom, 1:12–18

Man's failures and limitations are highlighted in his quest for wisdom. Solomon shows how human achievement (vv. 12–15) and human wisdom (vv. 16–18) are futile and incomprehensible.

2) Man's Failures and Limitations in Pleasure-seeking, 2:1–11

Solomon next showed how he conducted a study of pleasure seeking with wisdom as a guiding principle (vv. 3, 9).

3) Man's Failures and Limitations in Comparing Wisdom and Folly, 2:12–23

Solomon notices in this section man's failures and limitations by comparing wisdom and folly. In this regard wisdom and folly are seen from the perspective of death (vv. 12–17) and from the perspective of one's successor (vv. 18–23).

4) Recommendation: Enjoy Life, 2:24–26

In light of man's failures and limitations, Solomon recommends that man enjoy the basics of life given to him by God.

b. Finite Man's Lack of Ultimate Gain in This Life Is Reflected by the Coordination of Events with the Appropriate Time, 3:1–22

In this section Solomon demonstrates that man has certain limitations in understanding how God is providentially working.

1) Finite Man's Limitations in Understanding God's Providential Arrangement of All the Events of Life, vv. 1–15

Solomon reflects in this unit that he has observed that God has appointed a time for everything. This is part of God's eternal, inscrutable, unchangeable providence. Solomon initially states his principle in vv. 1–8: there is a time for everything. In v. 9 he notes that toil does not bring meaningful profit. This is followed by his rationale in vv. 10–11 and his recommendation to enjoy life in vv. 12–15.

2) Finite Man's Limitations in Understanding God's Providential Arrangement of the Times of Judgment, vv. 16–22

Though God's wise and perfect plan includes an appropriate time for everything, there is one item that appears to be exceptional, viz., injustice taking place in the halls of justice. Solomon initially makes this observation in v. 16. He then provides the reasons why God permits injustice to continue in this earthly sphere, vv. 17–21, and he finally makes a recommendation to enjoy the life that God has given us, v. 22.

2. Finite Man's Lack of Ultimate Gain in This Life Is Reflected During the Difficult Times of Life, 4:1–16

This chapter relates to issues that can hinder one from finding satisfaction in his God-given roles. Though vv. 1–3 share a theme of oppression with 3:16–22, I have taken them as two different but related units. Chapter 4 appears to be pointing out certain difficulties of life that may keep one from enjoying his divinely given commands (3:22). These difficulties relate to situations involving oppression (vv. 1–3) and work (vv. 4–12). These situations are bound together by the power structure of society and how people respond to this. Each of the stanzas in this chapter is introduced by the same Hebrew verb, which is translated in KJV as "I considered" in vv. 1, 4, and as "I saw" in v. 6; there is one exception and that is vv. 13–16. An additional feature that dominates is the use of the "better than" proverbs in 4:3, 6, 9, and 13. The first two conclude the stanza, the third is at the medial point and functions as the fulcrum of this stanza, and the final initiates its stanza.

a. Man's Failures and Limitations Are Demonstrated in Situations Related to Oppression, vv. 1–3.

3:16–22 was a motivation for this; however, the situation has been broadened here for in 3:16–22 oppression was related to the halls of justice, here it is oppression wherever it occurs. In addition, vv. 1–3 attach an additional thought that there is no one to assist.

b. Man's Failures and Limitations Are Demonstrated in Situations Related to Work, vv. 4–16.

These relate further to hindrances in situations related to work which hinder man in enjoying his God-given roles. In this section we should notice that man's labor is not satisfying because of labor (vv. 4–6) and selfish greed (v. 7–16).

3. Finite Man's Lack of Ultimate Gain in This Life Is Reflected by the Relative Value of Riches, 5:1–6:9.

In this section Solomon continues the thought of hindrances to the enjoyment theme of 3:22; however, there is one distinction between 4:1–16 and 5:1–6:9. The former focuses primarily on not finding enjoyment in work. The latter emphasizes the fruits of one's labor, the earnings or results of one's labor. This section is brought to a conclusion in 6:9 where "enigmatic, a chasing after the wind" is used for the final time in this book.

In this section Solomon demonstrates that the value of riches is relative. This context is dealing with how one may lose what he has worked for. He shows their relative value by demonstrating how a rash vow may result in God removing his riches (5:1–7), how governmental oppression may result in their loss (5:8–9), how one’s own covetousness may result in one not being able to enjoy them (5:10–12), how excessive striving to accumulate wealth may result in misery (5:13–17). These four issues focusing on the hindrances to enjoying one’s wealth form a hierarchy starting with God and moving down to man himself. Though there are hindrances to enjoying wealth, Solomon balances the picture in 5:18–6:9 by demonstrating that there is some value to wealth when enjoyed as God permits.

a. The Relative Value of Riches Is Demonstrated by a Rash Vow Resulting in Their Loss, 5:1–7.

As man searches for ultimate gain, meaning and purpose in this life, Solomon’s advice has been to find satisfaction in the roles that God has given man. He then maintains that God may remove this from the Old Testament Israelite when he worships God in a way contrary to what he has prescribed. This is one hindrance to man enjoying the fruit of his labor. Solomon provides a caution about making vows in vv. 1–3 and about honoring vows in vv. 4–7.

b. The Relative Value of Riches Is Demonstrated by Governmental Oppression Resulting in Their Loss, 5:8–9.

In these two verses Solomon describes a situation where one who is superior in authority over another abuses his power. This abuse of authority results in loss for the underdog.

c. The Relative Value of Riches Is Demonstrated by One’s Own Covetousness Resulting in One Not Being Able to Enjoy Them, 5:10–12.

Solomon gives three proverbs demonstrating that wealth cannot ultimately satisfy.

d. The Relative Value of Riches Is Demonstrated by Excessive Striving to Accumulate Wealth Resulting in Misery, 5:13–17.

The point of this stanza is to highlight the uncertainty of wealth. This uncertainty is demonstrated by the possibility that they may be lost. He deals with the acquisition and loss of wealth in vv. 13–14a and the results from the loss of one’s wealth, vv. 14b–16b. In light of this, he then poses a question about the ultimate gain from wealth, vv. 16c–17.

e. The Relative Value of Riches Is Demonstrated by the Fact that It Has Some Value When Enjoyed as God Enables, 5:18–6:9.

Since wealth is frustrating in that it cannot provide ultimate gain, meaning and purpose in life, what should we then do? In 5:18–20 Solomon gives a moral about enjoying life and toil as a gift from God. He then provides a warning in 6:1–9. Solomon’s point with this warning is to demonstrate that God has not given all men the ability to enjoy their wealth.

C. Second Discourse: Exhortations to Godly Living in Spite of Finite Man's Inability to Understand God's Past or Future Work, 6:10–11:6

The expressions involving the concepts “do(es) not know” or “cannot know” (6:12; 9:1, 12; 10:14, 11:2, 6) and “do(es) not discover” or “cannot discover” (7:14, 24, 28; 8:17) are characteristic of this section. In addition, many recommendations, commendations (such as “it is good,” 7:18; or “X is better than Y,” 7:2, 5; 9:16, 18), and imperatives are found in 6:10–11:6. Consequently, this latter half of the book contains much advice on how to live in the midst of the constant reminders that man is ignorant concerning God's past work (that is, “what God has done,” 7:13; cf. 8:17) and His future work (such as 9:1; 10:14; 11:2). Solomon's intention with this practical advice was to exhort Israel to fear God (7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and to live obedient lives that would please Him (cf. 7:26 with 2:26).

1. Introduction, 6:10–12

This section summarizes what has gone before and it also introduces us to the next section.

a. Summation of the Preceding Section, vv. 10–11

Two ideas are presented here which were mentioned in 1:12–6:9. “Whatever exists has already been named” (6:10) is found in 1:9, 15; 3:15. In addition, the puzzling nature of many words in 6:11 was part of the fabric of 4:17–5:6. These two concepts summarize 1:12–6:9.

b. An Overview of the Following Section, v. 12

In light of the summation of vv. 10–11, two observations are made in v. 12 that provide an overview of what is to follow: “who knoweth what is good for man” (see 2:3, 24; 3:12, 22; 5:17) and “who can tell a man what shall be after him” (cf. 3:22). Each of these receives much more attention in what follows. The basic idea running through the second part of this book is that man cannot fathom what God has done. Man's inability to comprehend this is demonstrated in two ways: man's inability to find out what God has done—God's plan as it relates to what is good for man (developed in 7:1–8:17) and man's inability to know the future (developed in 9:1–11:6).

2. Man's Inability to Understand God's Plan, 7:1–8:17

This section of material is bound together by expression denoting man's inability to comprehend the plan of God as it pertains to the past and present. Some of the expressions highlighting man's limitations include some such as “who can find it out” (7:24) and “I find not” (7:28). These are part of Solomon's literary fabric that reflects man's finiteness in understanding the plan of God. The conclusion to this section summarizes this quite well. “Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it” (8:17). Man's limitations in this section relate to what is going on in this earthly sphere of existence as God's plan is being worked out. Some of the various expressions that Solomon uses to describe God's plan are these: “the work of God” (7:13), “the reason of things” (7:25), “all the work of God” (8:17), and

“the work that is done under the sun” (8:17). These expressions are Solomon’s way of referring to the plan of God. Consequently, these two chapters show that finite man cannot comprehend God’s plan. In this section, Solomon shows that a man cannot comprehend the significance of prosperity and adversity (7:1–14), he cannot understand the significance of justice and wickedness (7:15–29), and he is ignorant of the administration of divine retribution, 8:1–17.

- a. **Man Cannot Comprehend the Significance of Prosperity and Adversity, 7:1–14.**  
A series of seven proverbs are presented in this first section (vv. 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 11). In this section Solomon uses the “better than” proverbs to give his advice. To understand the overall significance of these proverbs we must first look at the question in 6:12, “What is good for man in this life, all the days of his enigmatic life,” and then compare it with 7:1a and 7:14b. Solomon’s point is that in the midst of prosperity and adversity both ultimately coming from God (7:14), one should have a good reputation/testimony (7:1). This is what is good for man. In developing his thought, Solomon shows that one’s manner of living is important (v. 1), that wise living reflects on the brevity of life (vv. 2–4), that wise living reflects on wise counsel to live godly lives in all circumstances (vv. 5–10), that wisdom is more valuable for living than wealth (vv. 11–12), and that wisdom reflect that God’s plan is unchangeable and incomprehensible (vv. 13–14).
- b. **Man Cannot Comprehend the Significance of Justice and Wickedness, 7:15–29.**  
Solomon further develops his observations made in v. 14. If no one can discover anything about his future, how do we harmonize this with a mechanical and immediate view of retribution theology? In these verses Solomon provides some correctives for some extremes in retribution theology. His correctives include three issues: excessive emphasis on one’s own righteousness and increasing one’s wickedness lead to an early death (vv. 15–18), wisdom is good but it does not absolutely give adequate protection (vv. 19–24), and true righteousness and true wisdom do not exist (vv. 25–29).
- c. **Man Is Ignorant of the Administration of Divine Retribution, 8:1–17.**  
In this chapter it is important to see how vv. 1–9 and 10–17 fit together. In v. 1 the benefits of wisdom are magnified; however, in the final verse Solomon notes that man is limited in his wisdom. Wisdom may help a man in avoiding the wrath of a king (vv. 2–9), however, man does not have enough wisdom to figure out how God administers justice (vv. 10–17).
  - 1) **A Wise Man’s Prudent Obedience to the King Helps Him to Avoid the King’s Wrath, vv. 1–9**  
In developing the thought of this section, Solomon notes in vv. 1–4 that a wise man knows how to behave in the presence of a king and how a wise man averts the king’s anger by his obedience to the king, vv. 5–9.
  - 2) **A Wise Man Cannot Understand God’s Administration of Justice, vv. 10–17.**  
Having shown the general advantage, though with some limitations, that a wise man has when it comes to dealing with a king, Solomon now shows that with all his advantages the wise man does not understand how divine justice is

administered; this is to say, he does not understand how God works. In vv. 10–14, Solomon focuses on God’s justice in this sin-cursed world. He draws attention to his limitations in understanding why the wicked sometimes get what the righteous deserves and the righteous receives what the wicked deserve. However, he is confident that in the final analysis those who fear God will be better off than the wicked. In light of the sometimes-puzzling nature of God’s administration of justice, Solomon commends the enjoyment of life and summarizes his attempt to obtain wisdom, vv. 15–17. These verses not only bring this chapter to a conclusion but they also form an appropriate conclusion to this section of material that was begun in chapter seven.

### 3. Man’s Inability to Understand the Future, 9:1–11:6

Solomon repeats a number of key phrases in this section such as “no man knoweth” (9:1, 12; 10:14) or another equivalent revolving around a negation of knowing (9:5, 10, 10:15; 11:2, 5, 6). This basic expression is used three times in 11:5–6 and suggests that it brings this section of material to a conclusion. These expressions reflect that Solomon is dealing with man’s inability to know what the future will bring. In this section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon examine man’s inability to know what will happen to him and his inevitable death (9:1–16), hindrances to man’s wisdom in discerning the future (9:17–10:20), and an encouragement to work diligently in spite of an inscrutable future (11:1–6).

#### a. Man’s Inability to Know What Will Happen to Him and His Inevitable Death, 9:1–16

Solomon’s thought can be broken down into four subsections: the inevitability of death for all men (vv. 1–6), the wise man’s response to the inevitability of death (vv. 7–10), the unpredictable timing of death (vv. 11–12), and wisdom’s great value in an unpredictable world (vv. 13–16).

#### b. Though Wisdom Has Great Value, Its Limitations Hinder Man from Knowing the Future, 9:17–10:20.

Wisdom has great value in assisting man to live in this earthly sphere; however, it cannot help man predict the future. Solomon highlights this in the following six units: wisdom’s strength and vulnerability to a little folly (9:17–18); though folly may have an affect on wisdom, wisdom is superior (10:1–4), an example of wisdom’s vulnerability (10:5–7), wisdom’s constant dangers (10:8–11), the wise man’s ignorance of the future influences the wise man to control the use of his speech (10:12–15), and foolish leadership may be a hindrance to wisdom (10:16–20).

#### c. Though Man Is Ignorant of the Future, He Should Work Diligently, 11:1–6.

That this is a separate unit from chapter ten is demonstrated by the clear change in subject matter. Solomon now draws upon the created world, like sea, earth, rain, trees, clouds, etc. and in v. 5 he focuses on the Creator. Another issue that indicates that this is a unit relates to the use of imperatives in vv. 1, 2, and 6. In vv. 1–2 Solomon gives a command to labor diligently with wisdom (by diversifying one’s investments), though the future is uncertain. In vv. 3–4 he

provides an example of laboring diligently with wisdom, in spite of the future's uncertainty. His concluding advice is that just as man cannot explain the direction that the wind will take or how a baby's body is formed in its mother womb, man even more so cannot explain divine providence. Therefore, labor diligently (v. 6) recognizing that God is ultimately in control.

#### D. Conclusion: Final Exhortation to Enjoy Life in a God-fearing Manner for God Will Judge Man, 11:7–12:14

With this last section of material, Solomon brings his work to a conclusion. Since the subject matter has changed from diversifying one's investment (11:1–6) to an extended section dealing with making the most of life in an enigmatic world, it would appear that this is a new section. However, this is not to be taken as something that is simply attached with no connection to the preceding unit. This section is bound to the preceding through the use of terminology reflecting the natural realm.

##### 1. Concluding Poem, 11:7–12:8

Based upon content of this poem and the use of "enigmatic" (11:8, 10; 12:8), we could divide these verses in a fourfold manner. In the first section (11:7–8), we should notice that Solomon introduces us to two themes, enjoyment of life and remembering. These are then elaborated on further in the second and third subdivisions. In the second subdivision, he develops the enjoyment theme (11:9–10), and in the third, the remembering theme (12:1–7). In the final subdivision, the subject of the book is restated (12:8; cf. 1:2).

##### 2. Epilogue, 12:9–14

In the final verses Solomon concludes his work. In vv. 9–12 he reminds us about his authority in writing this book and in vv. 13–14 he concludes with an exhortation to fear God and keep his commandments.

### III. Selected Bibliography on Ecclesiastes

Estes, Daniel J. *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Garrett, Duane A. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. New American Commentary. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, Kenneth A. Matthews, and David S. Dockery. Nashville: Broadman, 1993.

Glenn, Donald R. "Ecclesiastes." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, Victor Books, 1985.

Hubbard, David A. *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. The Communicator's Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1991.

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*. Everyman's Bible Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1979.

Keddie, Gordon J. *Ecclesiastes*. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2002.

Longman, Tremper, III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Edited by R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

- McCabe, Robert V. "The Message of Ecclesiastes." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Spring 1996): 85–112.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006.
- Wright, J. Stafford. "Ecclesiastes." In vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein and Richard P. Polcyn. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.