

Ecclesiastes in Brief

While God favors your effort in the world, be glad and joyful, because there's no labor to be done in the grave. No planning. No knowledge. No wisdom.

I saw something else out in the world. It's not always the brilliant who become rich, or the strong who win battles. The turmoil of life twists all that around, and evil times fall unexpectedly. Consider the wise peasant who saved the city, but was then forgotten, his wisdom despised.

Wisdom is good, but it can be so easily overturned. I have seen fools elevated to rulership, and their dullness pervades everything. What a tragedy for that land! So prepare for evil times with generosity. Don't hesitate, waiting for the right moment, for you cannot hope to predict the outworking of this world that God has established.

Light is sweet — until darkness comes to underscore its emptiness. Be happy while you can, but know that God's judgment will come. So remember your Creator while you are young, before the days of trouble come upon you. The sun grows dim, pleasure departs, and mourners tramp the streets. Remember him before that final tragedy, when the dust has returned to the ground, and the breath to God who gave it.

There are many weighty and tedious theories around, but focus on these wise words: fear God and keep his commandments.

This is the essence of mankind, for God will bring everything we do into judgment.

This is what the teacher says: It is futile! All the effort in the world accomplishes nothing. Things start, they finish, they start again. Nothing really gets done, and all will be forgotten by generations to come.

I tried to understand what goes on in the world. My! What a burden God has laid on mankind — all that effort achieves nothing! Even the pursuit of wisdom is like chasing after the wind.

I wondered whether pleasure could provide satisfaction. I decided to conduct great projects, to amass all kinds of wealth and majesty to myself, and to indulge in every conceivable pleasure.

But then I stepped back and realized how empty it was. Nothing was gained. Even wisdom doesn't last. Wisdom is better than folly, but death makes fools of us all.

I began to hate life because of the empty labor I had toiled over. What will happen to the things I labored for when I die? Maybe squandered by a fool who comes after me? How useless! What was accomplished by all that anxious toil, those sleepless nights?

Then I realized this is all from God. Those who please him may gain daily satisfaction. Those who don't are simply storing up wealth for others, and futility for themselves.

The activities of the world all have their own time and place, and beauty arises now and again. But God has put a sense of eternity in our hearts. And then comes the awful realization: while God's work endures for ever, ours has no lasting effect.

I looked out at the world. I saw wickedness instead of justice. I thought God would intervene, but then I realized he holds back so that we can appreciate how much we are like animals. The same breath, the same fate. Dust. We cannot rely on anything or anyone in the world.

Moreover, when I saw all the oppression that was taking place, I reckoned the dead (and especially the stillborn) are better off than the living. All this drive to achievement is being driven by meaningless envy! Why is there no contentment? Instead there is work, building, amassing. And for what?

At least, it is said, when there are two or three together, they can help and support each other. Strength in numbers. Yet even when I saw a wise young man come to power by mass acclaim, the next generation reviled him in his time. Sheer futility.

When you go to the house of God, go to listen rather than to speak. He is so much greater than you. Be careful what you promise before him. Why provoke his condemnation? Rather stand in awe.

Don't be surprised if you see the rights of the poor being violated. Striving after possessions is an addiction, and no amount of money is enough. Yet wealth is a mixed blessing. It brings sleeplessness, it is easily lost, and it is worthless in the nakedness of death.

Simply to be able to find satisfaction in work and possessions is like a gift from God. All too often, however, God grants a man wealth and honor, but not the ability to enjoy them. Instead a stranger enjoys the fruit of his work. This is the futility of the world. If a man cannot enjoy the fruit of his labor right to the end, then the stillborn child has more peace than he, however rich he became. A man's striving has no end, but it achieves no victory. What will happen after he is gone?

The living must take to heart that they will die. Death is the destiny of everything they have done. Sorrow is designed to

drive this message home and lead to wisdom. And, while wisdom and money can both provide shelter, wisdom can preserve life.

Think about it. God has made the world crooked. Who can possibly straighten it? There are good times and there are bad times, all from God. A righteous man dies, and a wicked man lives long. The one who fears God will think about both aspects of life.

Yet, because I found life so hard to understand, I tried to investigate wisdom itself, to see how the world works. I wanted to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. I saw how bitter a woman's snare can be, and how men pursue many schemes, but I discovered no deep truths except that wisdom brightens a man's face.

A king will do just what he wants, and no-one has the power to question him. There is no-one who can predict the future, prevent the day of his death, or escape from the effects of the wickedness he practices. I saw rulers lording it over others, and the wicked receiving praise, all because of a failure to bring judgment in due time. Even though things ought to go better for those who fear God, I saw the wicked and the righteous getting the other's reward. More futility.

Here is what I recommend: simply enjoy your daily labor as best as you can. I see what God has done. He has deliberately deprived the world of significance. Each person is in God's hands, but no-one can know his own future, whether good or bad.

The tragedy that pervades the world is that everybody shares a common destiny. The hearts of men are full of madness while they live and then they join the dead. Then there's nothing left. The living have hope, but the dead have nothing, and they evaporate from the affairs of the world.