

# Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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## Chapter 9

### Imperatives for Living Wisely

In **conclusion**, the Preacher **determines to fear God, obey God, and enjoy life**  
(9:1–12:14)

Whereas chapter 8 focuses on the work of God as one of its themes, chapter 9 returns to an emphasis on the human condition. Solomon mentions God only twice in chapter 9 (vv. 1 and 7). However, those occurrences come “at crucial junctures in his argument.”<sup>1</sup> **Verses 7–9a provide the thematic core of the chapter.** In fact, they present the most emphatic of the enjoyment passages in the book.

#### In God's Hand (9:1)

The phraseology, “**I have taken . . . to my heart**” (v. 1), occurs also in 1:13, 17; 8:9, and 16. In fact, Solomon opens his discourse with this kind of statement and then repeats it in the second half of the book. The presence of the phraseology in 8:16 and 9:1 furnishes a transition from chapter 8 to chapter 9. Similar phraseology appears in 7:2 and a negative form of it in 7:21 (“do not take seriously” literally reads, “do not give your heart to”). **The “heart” involves his “total consciousness**—not solely intellectual reason, but experiential insight that has been gained through the avenues and alleys of emotional, sensual, physical and spiritual experience.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Solomon applies more than his brain to his search for an explanation for life's paradoxes. That to which he applies himself in the search consists of “**all this**,” which includes what has already been written as well as that which is yet ahead in the book<sup>3</sup>—in other words, the whole gamut of human existence and earthly life.

Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does “**explain**” translate the word Solomon uses

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 223.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 299.

in verse 1. The word for “explanation” in 7:25 and 27 comes from a different root word. The word employed here occurs only one other time (3:18, “tested”). NRSV and ESV offer a better translation for 9:1 with “examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.” Solomon reminds his readers of the reason for examining life in such detail and with such intensity. Yet, he does not focus his search on man apart from God or an awareness of the presence of God, because **he recognizes that God is in control of “the righteous and the wise and their deeds.”**

Scripture pairs “**righteous**” and “**wise**” in only seven texts (Deut 16:19; Prov 9:9; 11:30; 23:24; Eccl 7:16; 9:1; Hos 14:9). Ecclesiastes 7:16–17 contrasts righteous and wise with wicked and foolish. The three texts in Proverbs juxtapose the two characteristics (righteous and wise) in a way that indicates that the righteous are the wise and the wise are the righteous. Such appears to be the understanding in the Law (Deut 16:19) and in the prophets (Hos 14:9). By stating that “**their deeds are in the hand of God,**” Solomon reveals his conviction that the power of God controls the lives of the righteous/wise. His father, David, employed a similar phrase when faced with God’s inescapable judgment on the nation of Israel: “Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man” (2 Sam 24:14). The first enjoyment passage (Eccl 2:24) speaks of “the hand of God” as the source for man’s enjoyment of food, drink, and labor. Human beings do not exercise total control over their circumstances—they are not sovereign, God is. **The righteous/wise, as servants (= slaves) of God, must recognize His Lordship** and, like David, rest in His mercies even when facing the end of life “under the sun”—death.

To what does “**love or hatred**” refer? Fredericks takes the view that these two actions relate to mankind’s actions, not God’s. His primary argument relates to the inclusio formed by the two words in verses 1 and 6. **Verse 6 adds “their zeal,”** perhaps a reference to jealousy, making the overall reference mankind rather than God.<sup>4</sup> In other words, people have no clue regarding how others might receive them day by day. The wise and righteous encounter love in some situations, but hate in others. They have no prior knowledge of how people will treat them in the future.<sup>5</sup>

A different understanding of the meaning of “love or hatred” arises with the Old Testament’s association of God’s love or hate with acceptance or rejection in Malachi 1:2–3. In the light of such references, **Ecclesiastes 9:1 would seem to refer to the unpredictability of God’s favor.** Such favor might be restricted to some form of prosperity.<sup>6</sup> Lack of favor indicates adversity of some sort. Since the deeds of righteous people “are in the hand of God,” all His people are subject to Him.<sup>7</sup> With God’s control in mind, Solomon speaks of the inability of people to know whether God’s love or hate

<sup>4</sup> Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 206. See, also, C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 298.

<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 125.

<sup>6</sup> Victor E. Reichart and A. Cohen, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Five Megilloth*, 2 vols., ed. by A. Cohen, rev. by A. J. Rosenberg (London: Soncino Press, 1984), 2:87.

<sup>7</sup> The following commentators opt for the divine view (as opposed to the human view): Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 299; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 94; Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 204; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 227.

awaits them.<sup>8</sup> After all, **divine control dominates the context, making it unlikely that the reference would be to human emotions.**<sup>9</sup>

“**Anything awaits him**” (literally, “the all before them”) closes this first verse. Variety in the English versions reflects the translators’ uncertainty:

- “anything awaits him” (NASU, NASB)
- “Everything that confronts them” (NRSV)
- “Everything before them is vanity” (RSV—representing an addition to the text)
- “by anything *they see* before them” (NKJV); “by all *that is* before them” (KJV)
- “all is before them” (NJPS, JPS, ASV)
- “both are before him” (ESV)
- “Everything lies ahead of them” (HCSB)
- “no one knows what lies ahead” (NET—connecting the phrase more closely with what comes before it; cp. NIV)

Based upon the preceding statement regarding ignorance about whether one will encounter or receive love or hatred, the idea throughout the variety of translations is that **the events yet to come in a person’s life “under the sun” remain unknown.** Meanwhile, the righteous/wise will rest in the confidence that God controls what happens.

### **The Reality of Death and the Urgency of Living (9:2–10)**

Solomon continues his discourse with yet another very brief and enigmatic declaration, “**It is the same for all**” (literally, “The all just as for the all”). Coming back-to-back with the close of verse 1, the two statements form a hinge. The repetition of “the all” brings to mind the refrain that occurs throughout the book: “All is vanity.”<sup>10</sup> Every individual, regardless of their level of spiritual commitment (or lack thereof), falls prey to the fallen character of mankind.<sup>11</sup> **Every individual will someday experience death**—that is the universal condition faced by all human beings (v. 2). Solomon lists a number of examples:

- the **righteous** compared to the **wicked**
- the **good and clean** compared to the **unclean**<sup>12</sup>
- the person **with a sacrifice** compared to the person **without a sacrifice**
- the **good** person compared with the **sinner**
- **the one who vows** compared with **the person who makes no vow**

In the last pair, Eaton understands the first as one who takes an oath by the Lord’s name as part of promising allegiance to God’s covenant. The opposite would be a person who avoids such loyalty to the divine covenant.<sup>13</sup> On the other side of the matter, these could be the person who perjures himself, not taking their oath seriously, compared to someone having a “proper reverence for the seriousness of oaths.”<sup>14</sup> Eaton’s view offers the better option, since it preserves the order of good before bad throughout all five sets of

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 296 footnote 6.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 90.

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of the refrain at 1:2.

<sup>11</sup> Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 207.

<sup>12</sup> Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 180 explains that the combination “good and clean” might be “intended to clarify that it is not simply ritual cleanness to which Qohelet refers, but moral cleanness.”

<sup>13</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 299.

examples. **The point is that everyone without exception faces death.** Considering the inevitability of death in everyone's life, it is astonishing that people, knowing death is imminent, still "fill their lives with the distractions of a thousand passions and squander what little time they have to immediate but insignificant worries."<sup>15</sup> This is the very thought which Solomon will develop more fully in the coming chapters. He advises that everyone **avoid the distractions, focus on what is important, and use the remainder of one's life wisely.**

According to **verse 3**, the one fate, death itself, is an "evil" that awaits everyone. In Hebrew, the meaning of "evil" in such contexts comes within the semantic scope of "misery."<sup>16</sup> As he has in recent chapters, **Solomon focuses on the depravity of mankind:** "Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives." **Malevolence and madness make a morbid mixture.** Swindoll identifies this "insanity" (cf. 1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 10:13) with the answers people give to "hard questions, like: 'Why did you walk away from your family?' Or, 'How can you continue to live like that, knowing that it's wrong and that Scripture stands against such things?'"<sup>17</sup> As though to make certain the reader does not miss the message, Solomon brings the verse to a close by means of an abrupt ending that literally reads, **"and afterwards—to the dead!"**<sup>18</sup> Death comes that way—abruptly.

The word "**hope**" in **verse 4** entails the concept of **confidence, trust, or security.** It does not look forward to something or wish for something, it speaks of the certitude one has about something that will happen.<sup>19</sup> Solomon's bold **metaphor contrasting a live dog with a dead lion** derives from the confidence shown by a lion in his domain. Cringing and cowering street curs exercise greater confidence than a dead lion. The two animals typify the two extremes of wisdom and folly (Prov 26:11), power (Prov 30:30) and weakness, the majestic and the lowly (1 Sam 17:43).<sup>20</sup> **One advantage of the living is that they know they will die.**<sup>21</sup> In view of the meaning of certitude, Kaiser's three hopes<sup>22</sup> might be altered to more closely to the text: **(1)** the certitude of meeting God, **(2)** the certitude that it is significant how one lives, and **(3)** the certitude of God's glory standing as that which each must pursue "under the sun."

The dead know nothing of life under the sun and gain no more reward than what they have already gained during life (**v. 5**). In fact, they are forgotten "under the sun." The association of reward with being forgotten involves a pun in the Hebrew. "Reward" is the word *sakar* while "memory" is *zeker* from the root *zakar*.<sup>23</sup> The pun may heighten a

<sup>15</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 331.

<sup>16</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 181.

<sup>17</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 280.

<sup>18</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 141. See, also, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 227.

<sup>19</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 300.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 305.

sense of reversal.<sup>24</sup> **The expected reward (or, wages) for a lifetime of labor does not consist of being remembered after one is dead.** These verses do not deny the existence of an afterlife. Instead, they insist on the fact that a person can only enjoy God's "under the sun"-gifts in this life.<sup>25</sup>

Everyone's love, hate, and zeal perish from the earth at death (v. 6). Life will continue on without them. They no longer participate in the events that mark the passing of time and the advancements of the human race. **One's "lot/reward/portion" consists of "the measure of joy and satisfaction that comes through one's daily activities . . . found not in self-centred pleasures (2:1–11) but only when taken as the gift of God (3:22; 5:19)."**<sup>26</sup> The wise person rightly understands that **the opportunities and joys of this brief life happen only once.**

**Joy refrains** in Ecclesiastes manifest a growing crescendo from the first (2:24–26) to the last (11:7–10). In this refrain, comparison ("nothing better," 2:24) gives way to command ("**eat**," "**drink**," "**enjoy**"). Solomon issues "**an urgent summons to action**"<sup>27</sup> for the righteous to delight in God's gifts "under the sun." The very first command is "**Go!**" "It's a wakeup call. There's no time to waste. Stop your complaining! Stop nursing your anger! Stop brooding about your problems! Get over your anxiety!"<sup>28</sup> After all, "Why should anyone who truly fears God have the joy of life stolen out from under him because of the unresolved perplexities still remaining in the partially disclosed plan of God?"<sup>29</sup> **Solomon's advice coincides with the early church's behavior (Acts 2:46) and the Apostle Paul's injunctions (Phil 4:4; 1 Tim 4:1–4).** Wearing white garments (v. 8) indicates the attire of celebration and comfort. According to Fredericks, white clothing is cooler.<sup>30</sup> The fragrant oil calls to mind welcome hospitality (Ps 23:5), unity and blessing (Ps 133:1–3), and gladness (Isa 61:3).

**Verse 9** commands the enjoyment of **marital bliss** with one's wife (cp. Prov 5:15–19). Some interpreters take it as advising discretion regarding one's choice of companion prior to marriage, rather than speaking of life with a woman after marriage.<sup>31</sup> Leupold believes that the absence of the definite article suggests that the writer directs the instruction to the unmarried who should marry in order to enjoy God's gift.<sup>32</sup> However, other passages use the word "woman" without the definite article in contexts demanding the meaning of "wife" (e.g., Gen 24:7; Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam 18:27). **The object of "enjoy" is "life," not "woman."** A partnership exists through which to enjoy life. Without his wife, a man cannot experience the fullness of the God-designed life.<sup>33</sup>

Other documents from the Ancient Near East echo these same elements of joy in life—e.g., the Epic of Gilgamesh (ca. 2000 B.C.):<sup>34</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOT Supplement Series 26 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1984), 246.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 126–27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 209.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 215.

<sup>33</sup> Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 210.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 94. See E. A. Speiser, trans., "The Epic of Gilgamesh," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2nd ed., ed. by James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 90.

Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,  
 Make thou merry by day and by night.  
 Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,  
 Day and night dance thou and play!

Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,  
 Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.

...

Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!  
 For this is the task of [mankind]!

Solomon observes these same aspects of life on his own without the necessity of borrowing from the epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>35</sup> Noteworthy for its absence in the Epic of Gilgamesh, man's work or labor stands out in Ecclesiastes. Work forms a significant aspect of God-given joys. Solomon does not treat labor as either a curse or an option. Scripture stresses

- the dignity of labor as part of God's design from creation (Gen 2:15; Eccl 9:7)
- the necessity of work in a fallen world (Gen 3:17–19; Ps 104:14, 23; 2 Thess 3:10–12)
- the essentiality of the cycle of work and rest (Exod 20:9–10; 23:12; Eccl 5:12)
- the festivity arising from receiving the fruit of one's labors (Exod 23:16; Deut 16:13–15; Eccl 3:13; 9:7–9)
- the spirituality of work guided by the Spirit of God (Exod 31:3–5; 36:2–8; Rom 16:3, 6, 9, 12; Eph 4:12; Col 3:23)
- the community for which work provides (Deut 24:19; Prov 31:10–31; Eccl 4:9; Acts 20:35; Eph 4:28)
- the profitability of labor (Prov 14:23; Luke 10:7)
- the prosperity that results from labor with God's blessing (Deut 30:9; Ps 90:17; Prov 13:11)

**Verse 7** concludes with the thought that **God has “approved” mankind's labors.** “Approved” translates a Hebrew term that refers to divine acceptance, will, or favor. Enjoyment of the divine gifts in life “under the sun” belongs preeminently to those who do the divine will, who please God, who are recipients of His gracious favor. “God approves only that which is in conformity to his will and character.”<sup>36</sup> The imperatives in these verses direct the believer to pursue only those things that God identifies as receiving His stamp of approval. “**Already**” might be taken as “long ago”—perhaps a reference to creation and God's blessing upon man and the gifts of wife, food, and clothing.<sup>37</sup> The imperative “**Enjoy life**” (v. 9; literally, “See life”), means “experience life.”<sup>38</sup>

Words and phrases characteristic of the entire Solomonic treatise occur here: “fleeting life,” “He has given,” “under the sun,” “your reward,” “in life,” “your toil,” and “labored.” Such clustering of concepts draws our attention back to Solomon's original question (1:3). **The six enjoyments in 9:7–9 represent the advantages.** Note, also, the

<sup>35</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 359.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 233.

<sup>38</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

references to the individual's attitude or manner of enjoyment: "in happiness," "with a cheerful heart," experiencing God's approval, and a woman "whom you love."

**Verse 10** takes up the thought of verses 4–6 and anticipates the conclusion to *Ecclesiastes* in 11:1–12:8.<sup>39</sup> Sheol (in this context, the grave and the cessation of all bodily functions characteristic of a living person) does not offer opportunities for labor, activity, planning, applying knowledge, or increasing wisdom. Solomon does not deny immortality nor does he eliminate the activities of departed spirits, whether in a place of the righteous dead or a place of the unrighteous dead. He focuses on entering into life "under the sun" wholeheartedly and identifies divine gifts which one can only use or enjoy "under the sun." As Tidball remarks, "Let us use them! If we don't use them here, it is certain that we won't get the opportunity to use them in the hereafter."<sup>40</sup> Even greater yet is the fact that "If we do not enjoy God's gifts, we dishonor the Giver."<sup>41</sup> **First Corinthians 10:31** enjoins believers to "do all to the glory of God," while eating and drinking—indeed, in "whatever you do" (cp. Ps 118:24).

### **Life's Inescapable Ironies (9:11–12)**

Having previously itemized five sets of contrasting individuals in verse 2, Solomon now lists five ironies in **verse 11**:

- **the swift** might not win the race
- **the warriors** might not win the battle
- **the wise** might not obtain food (or, earn a living)
- **the discerning** might not gain wealth
- **the skilled** might not find favor

These ironies contribute to life's unpredictability.<sup>42</sup> Each irony states the negative first, in order to emphasize it. There is, for example, no guarantee that the swiftest individual in a race or a chase will be the victor (cp. Amos 2:14–15; see, also, Pss 33:17; 147:10; Prov 21:31). These ironies lead the reader to consider that God is the One in control of all outcomes. God alone provides those things that people value: wisdom, victory, food, wealth, favor, influence, and success (1 Sam 17:47; Ps 33:16–17; Rom 9:16).<sup>43</sup>

**"Time and chance" (v. 11)** might express the idea of "timely events." "Chance" represents an unhappy translation, since it refers to "a happening," not to anything like luck or fortune. The word for "time" is not the same one highlighted in chapter 3. This word occurs only here and in the Solomonic history at 1 Kings 5:4 (Hebrew, v. 18, "misfortune" is literally "evil occurrence"). In both contexts the term "chance" takes on the negative connotation of something like the English word "accident."

**Solomon makes the point that no one can know the timing for life's ironic moments (v. 12).** People can be trapped by circumstances just like a fish caught by a net or a bird caught by a cleverly designed trap. **"An evil time"** seems by context to refer to

<sup>39</sup> Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 210.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Tidball, *That's Just the Way It Is: A Realistic View of Life from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 157.

<sup>41</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 212.

<sup>43</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. by M. G. Easton, Commentaries on the Old Testament, C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 365.

more than just death—other calamities, disasters, and troubles may be included.<sup>44</sup> Trouble never comes at a good time—neither does death. A frugal man planning for his retirement, can leave life “under the sun” without the opportunity to enjoy it (cp. **Luke 12:16–21**). The chores for getting one’s house in order before leaving this life might never be completed. Something will always be left incomplete, absent, lost, or never started. Longman concludes that “human inability drives Paul to divine grace, while Qohelet ends up in frustration.”<sup>45</sup> However, Solomon’s frustration at this point in his discourse is a temporary reaction, not a permanent one. He later speaks of **a conscious awareness of the Creator’s presence** (12:1), **the reality of God’s future judgment** (11:9; 12:14), and **the return of man’s spirit to God Himself** (12:7). The fact that God will judge the good as well as the bad (12:14) indicates that God will make some form of distinction between the two beyond the sun.

### A Lesson from History (9:13–18)

**Wisdom forms the theme of the final section of this chapter.** In verses 13–18 “wise” and “wisdom” occur a total of seven times. A specific event involving a besieged city and a wise citizen (vv. 14–15) occupies a key role in the section. On the one hand, the outcome follows the pattern of 2:16, 4:13–16, and 9:5—people will eventually forget the wise and their exploits (cp. Pss 31:12; 41:5). In this particular case, the city was small (v. 14), making the forgetting of one of its more significant citizens all the more poignant (cp. v. 5).<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, wisdom does produce results, including the saving of lives even during a time of war (cp. 7:12; Prov 20:18; 21:22; 24:5–6). A similar situation arose at Abel Beth-Maacha where a wise woman succeeded in delivering her city, but her name is unrecorded and unremembered (**2 Sam 20:14–22**).

“**Large siegeworks**” (v. 14) represents the same Hebrew word appearing in verse 12 where it is translated “**net**.” By using the same word, Solomon intentionally associates the siege of the city with those adversities that might suddenly come upon either an individual or a community.<sup>47</sup> Provan points to the account of the Assyrian king Sennacherib that describes his siege of Jerusalem in the time of King Hezekiah as shutting Hezekiah up in “his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.”<sup>48</sup>

The margin of NASU notes that “he delivered” could be translated alternatively as “he might have delivered” (v. 15). Some commentators prefer to see the verb as speaking of a hypothetical situation.<sup>49</sup> However, the context appears to favor an actual past event, since Solomon claims to have observed the situation he describes (v. 13).

The story about the wise man draws out **four conclusions**: (1) Wisdom proves superior to might (v. 16a), (2) people do not always respect or honor wisdom (v. 16b), (3) powerful people can make it difficult to listen to the voice of wisdom (v. 17), and

<sup>44</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 130–31.

<sup>45</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 232.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Huwiler, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, by Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 212.

<sup>47</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 313.

<sup>48</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 192. For the Assyrian record, see Mordechai Cogan, “Sennacherib’s Siege of Jerusalem (2.119B),” in *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols., ed. by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 2:303.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Gordis, *Koheleth*, 309.



(4) no matter how superior wisdom might be, one foolish act by a sinner can destroy the good results of wisdom.<sup>50</sup>

What are “**the words of the wise heard in quietness**” (v. 17)? Does the statement mean “heard in quietness” (referring to the words being spoken in quietness or calm) or “in quietness is heard” (those who hear should listen to the words in quietness, without interruption)?<sup>51</sup> The parallel (“the shouting of a ruler among fools”) indicates the first understanding. Some commentators prefer to take the word “heard” in the sense of “hearable” or “worth hearing.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the words of the wise spoken quietly or calmly possess value and ought to be taken seriously.<sup>53</sup> The wise also face disrespect among their fellow citizens (cp. Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44).

**Verse 18b** reminds readers that even wisdom can be foiled: “**but one sinner destroys much good.**” In the biblical account of Israel’s entry into Canaan and the disastrous defeat at Ai, the example of Achan’s disobedience provides just such an occurrence (Josh 7:1–26).

At this point in the book, Kidner observes that **Solomon “has made his case against our self-sufficiency.”**<sup>54</sup> Indeed, he has “finished his work of demolition. The site has been cleared: he can turn to building and planting.”<sup>55</sup> Kidner lays out the closing chapters as reminders to be

- **sensible** (chapt. 10)
- **bold** (11:1–6)
- **joyful** (11:7–10)
- **godly** (chapt. 12)<sup>56</sup>

#### Questions for study:

- In what ways does God reveal His control over your life?
- Why do we fill our lives with distractions and squander what little time we have to insignificant worries?
- What other hard questions can you think of besides, “Why did you walk away from your family?”?
- In what ways can Christians enjoy God’s gifts “under the sun”?
- How can we prepare ourselves and our families for our inevitable departure from life “under the sun”?

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 132 footnote 2. See, also, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 236.

<sup>52</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 149.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 236.

<sup>54</sup> Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 86.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*