

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter One

One question has dominated the minds of men and women over the generations, "What is the meaning of life?" Many wrestle with this question today. Maybe you are asking yourself, "What is life all about? Why am I here? What is the purpose of life?" These are the very questions looked at and answered in the book of Ecclesiastes. As you read through this book, you will find that the phrase "Under the Sun" is used twenty-nine times. The phrase has to do with that which is earthbound and temporal. The writer is looking at life on earth. He examines all of life's activities and challenges. He does so from two positions. First, he looks at life from the standpoint of the man or woman without God. Life is seen to be empty and futile. Second, he looks at life from the standpoint of the man or woman who knows God. He sees things from God's perspective and life is full of meaning and purpose.

We are looking at the first eleven verses of chapter one in this study. Who wrote this book? Verse one says, "The words of the Teacher, Son of David, King of Jerusalem". The word "Teacher" translates a Hebrew word meaning: "To gather an assembly with a view to speaking to them". The Teacher has something important to say about finding purpose in life. The people gather to hear him because that is what they want to know. The writer never gives his name but we're left in no doubt about his identity. He was the Son of David, the King in Jerusalem, and a seeker after wisdom. He excelled in wisdom. He says in verse 16, "I thought to myself, 'look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me'." Only one biblical king fits that description - Solomon. We read in 1 Kings 4 verse 30, "Solomon's wisdom was greater than all the wisdom of all the men of the east, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt." In fact, Solomon wrote three books of the Old Testament. He wrote the "Song of Songs". We believe he wrote this in his early years. Those days of romance and courtship! He wrote the book of Proverbs. It's likely he wrote this in his middle years as he grew to maturity and learned lessons about life. He wrote Ecclesiastes in his later years, when his wisdom and observations were really seasoned.

We see two things in these first eleven verses. The first thing we discover is, the definition of life without Christ. Another phrase common to this book is found in verse 2. We read, "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher, 'Utterly Meaningless!' Everything is meaningless." All of life is meaningless when it is lived without reference to God. "Meaningless" has been defined by someone as, "Something without substance which quickly passes away like morning mist." Meaninglessness comes as a result of pursuing earthly things as an end in themselves to find purpose. It always leads to frustration and a growing sense of disappointment. Solomon had proved this by personal experience. We will see this as we go through the book during the coming days. Verse three shows the tactic of the book. We read, "What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the Sun?". The design of Ecclesiastes is to get you to ask searching questions about your life and its direction. In all your activities, toil, and entertainments are you fulfilled? What have you gained by it? All your earthly efforts haven't filled that empty void in your life. Jesus said in John 6 verse 27, "Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Life without Christ is just like perishable food. Nothing lasts and nothing satisfies. Christ is the answer to your deepest needs. Life finds purpose when you follow Jesus Christ.

The second thing we discover is, the depiction of life without Christ. To prove the meaninglessness of life "under the sun", Solomon directs our attention to four aspects of life in this passing world. Each highlights the futility of life. In verse four we read, "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever." Here we see the endless round of human life with its beginning, ending, coming and going; no one lasts; everything changes. Why look for purpose and stability in such a changing world? It will never be yours because it's subject to such rapid and consistent change. You need to say with the hymn-writer, "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; earth's joys grow dim,

its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see. Oh Thou who changest not, abide with me." The unchanging Christ alone can give a sense of purpose in a changing and uncertain world.

Next we see the repetition of nature. In Verses 5 to 7 we read of the Sun the wind and the sea. Solomon says in verse 5, "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurtles back to where it rises". He observes that the wind blows and goes round and round. The streams flow into the sea yet the sea is never full. Life is a constant unchanging cycle. All creation is busy. It goes so far and then no further just to repeat what it did before. Why look for purpose in something that is a never ending repetition. Something that can take you so far yet no further. Next we look at human experience. Solomon says in verse 6, "All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, or the ear its fill of hearing". For example, we hear music, it thrills us, but after a while the novelty goes and we look elsewhere. We become bored and dissatisfied. Nothing that this world offers can reach into the depths of our souls and meet our deep need for fulfilment and purpose. Only Christ the bread of life can do that.

Last we look at history. In verse 9 we read, "What has been will be again, and what has been done will be done again." We often say, "history repeats itself", and that is true. On the stage of world history the actors and the scenery change, but the storyline remains the same. Solomon says in verse 10, "Is there anything of which one can say 'look, this is something new!' It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time." Throughout history men have claimed that a new discovery, invention, or commodity will bring the satisfaction we have been looking for. But it has always failed, despite the claims made for it. It is simply something old in a new guise! Only the unchanging God of heaven can bring that ultimate sense of meaning in an empty world.

Has the bubble burst for you in life? I trust you'll seek the Lord while He may be found and find that fulfilment you are looking for in Him.

In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon is addressing the question, "What is the meaning of life? ". He has looked at life on earth and concluded that "Everything is meaningless". In the first part of chapter one Solomon has given a general overview of the futility of life. Now in chapter one verses 12 to 18, that we are looking at, he highlights specific things that men and women pursue in their search for purpose. Chapter 1 verse 12 begins a series of four Sermons that the Teacher preaches and which finish at chapter 12 verse 7. This first sermon takes us from chapter 1 verse 12 to chapter 3 verse 15. This is the first part of the sermon and Solomon shows how gaining earthly wisdom fails to give a sense of meaning to life.

Solomon was in a good position to get wisdom. He says in verse 12, "I, the Teacher, was King over Israel". As King he had all the resources in his palace. He was rich enough to own all the great books. As King he rubbed shoulders with political thinkers and men with great minds. Jerusalem was the academic centre of Israel. It is possible to gain worldly wisdom by observation and personal experience of life. Solomon made this his aim in pursuit of meaning. He says in verse 13, "I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven". Now that is a fine objective to have in life. It is always good to improve your education. It is good to broaden your mind. Solomon isn't saying it is wrong. He studied everything "under heaven". I'm sure that included science, history, geography, philosophy, trade, law, customs, people and technology. One thing he did find was that it was hard work! He says in verse 13, "What a heavy burden God has laid on men!" Study is a toil. It is a laborious task. Have you ever wondered why the acquisition of knowledge is hard work? The answer goes back to Genesis in the Old Testament. Adam tried a short cut to gaining knowledge. He fell for the Devil's lie. Satan said in Genesis 3 verse 5, "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil". Adam sinned and God said to him in Genesis 3 verse 19, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food". As part of the curse, and the fall, knowledge can only be gained by the "sweat of your brow". However, Solomon was prepared to do it. He says in verse 14, "I have seen all the things

that are done under the sun". He gained understanding. He says in verse 16, "I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge". But the question is this: As good as it is, did the pursuit and gathering of knowledge bring him a sense of fulfilment and purpose in life. What's his answer? Solomon says in verse 14, "all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind". He was still left with that familiar feeling of frustration and emptiness. Why was that? The key is found in the words "grasping after the wind". Have you ever tried to hold on to the wind as it blows by you? You can grab for it but it blows through your fingers - it is gone. There is nothing there. There are two reasons why worldly wisdom leaves you frustrated. The first is found in verse 15. We read, "What is twisted cannot be straightened, what is lacking cannot be counted". Consider all the advance in knowledge and technology today. Yet with it all we've not stopped wars, and evil in the world. There are so many problems we haven't straightened out even yet. No amount of worldly wisdom has straightened out the crooked hearts of men. Every new day brings new problems and we haven't got the answers. The number of questions lacking answers is beyond counting. The second reason is found in verse 18. We read, "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief". Why does sorrow come with increased wisdom? Because the more you know the more ignorant you see you are! There are still so many unanswered questions that you are left empty, sorrowful because you don't have the answers, and frustrated with life. In other words, learning and education let you down in some critical areas of your searching. So you see its "grasping for the wind". Many critical answers to man's searching questions slip past us, blow by us, unanswered.

The message of the Gospel is that all is not lost. There is a wisdom that can bring fulfilment; that can make the crooked straight; that can bring a real deep sense of meaning. It is not the wisdom "that is done under heaven" as we've seen, it is that wisdom that James speaks about. We read in James 3 verse 17, "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere".

This is divine wisdom. This wisdom is a person. We read in I Corinthians chapter 1 verse 30, "You are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God". We read in Colossians 2 verse 3, "In him (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". Jesus Christ can straighten out your life. He can straighten out hearts twisted because of sin. He alone has all the key answers to the questions of life. This wisdom found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ doesn't bring sorrow and grief. It brings forgiveness, joy, peace, satisfaction, blessing, and, a real sense of purpose in the complex tapestry of life. This wisdom is written down for us in the Bible. Read the scripture and be made wise. The book of Proverbs contains much wise instruction. We find wisdom personified because wisdom is a person the Lord Jesus. Wisdom says in chapter 8 verse 6, "Listen, for I have worthy things to say". Then the Lord tells us the benefits of listening to him. He says in verse 35, "For whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord". You find Christ by repenting over your sins and seeking his forgiveness. He then gives his abundant life. The life mentioned here is life with purpose - life with fulfilment. Life with meaning that is never left frustrated or disappointed. Christ is the answer. Now what is your question?

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## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Two

Is it possible to find real meaning and purpose in life that is totally satisfying? This is the question Solomon answers in the book of Ecclesiastes. He does so by preaching four sermons. The first begins in chapter 1 verse 12 and takes us through to chapter 3 verse 15. In the first part of this first sermon Solomon has shown us the emptiness of worldly wisdom to bring a sense of fulfilment in life. Having tried that he now moves on to six well worn paths many tread in their pursuit of purpose and meaning. These are listed in chapter two that we are considering this time..

Many look to pleasure to find fulfilment. Solomon says in chapter 2 verse 1, "I thought in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." The word "pleasure" translates a Hebrew word that has the sense of "recreation". It covers things like hobbies, sport, all kinds of leisure pursuits. Solomon does not have sinful pleasure in mind. This is legitimate pleasure; things not sinful in themselves. As he pursued pleasure what did he find? He says at the end of verse 1, "But that also proved to be meaningless." A well known sportsman knew that there was something missing in his life. Although top of his sport he lacked fulfilment. He noticed that a fellow rugby player had a contentment he never had. He asked him about it. His friend was a Christian and told him of the personal relationship he had with Jesus Christ. The sportsman realised that this was what he needed. He trusted Jesus Christ as his Saviour and found the sense of purpose and meaning he had been looking for. Recreation can be healthy and good, but it cannot give that deep inner satisfaction. Only Jesus can do that.

Some people try Amusement. Solomon said in verse 2, "Laughter I said is foolish." Some say "Don't treat life so seriously". Solomon found that amusement is short lived. Laughter can be hollow and empty. A well known entertainer told of how he made thousands of people laugh but his own heart was breaking. Then he became a Christian and found a real lasting joy in his heart that he had never found anywhere else. David tells us in the Psalms where real joy is found. He said in Psalm 16 verse 11, "You have made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

Many try Drink so as to find contentment and satisfaction in life. Solomon realised the foolishness of drink because he had seen drunks making a fools of themselves. But what was the attraction? He said in verse 3, "I tried cheering myself with wine." He was wary of it because of the effects he had seen that wine had on people. He says in verse 3, "My mind still guiding me with wisdom." Perhaps he thought there may something of value in it. His conclusion is found in that third verse. He was "embracing folly". A drunk became a Christian and told his workmates of his new lifestyle. They laughed at him. "You don't believe all that rubbish in the Bible do you, about Jesus turning water into wine?" "One thing I do know", said the man, "Jesus has turned beer into furniture and food in my house!" What is good about a hangover? Jesus said in John 4 verse 14, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst." The living water thoroughly satisfies the thirsty soul.

Solomon now turns to Possessions. So many people look for fulfilment and purpose in material possessions. Solomon had it all. He said in verse 4, "I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards." He goes on to talk about his many servants, his musicians, and his great riches. He tells us in verse 10, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired". Are you accumulating many possessions trying to find meaning and contentment? Jesus said in Luke 12 verse 15, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." A member of a well known singing group was asked why she left them. She was rich and famous. She had amassed great wealth and riches. The answer she gave was, "I didn't feel fulfilled". The poorest man or woman is the person who may have millions in the bank but does not have Jesus Christ. There was a very wealthy

entrepreneur who had the nickname "Mr. Happiness". His biographer revealed that this man, who gave a lot of pleasure to millions, was far from happy himself in his own heart. We read in 2 Timothy 6 verse 17 that we are, "Not to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God who gives us richly all things to enjoy."

Solomon tries wisdom again. Perhaps he felt he may have missed something the first time! Yet he arrives at the same conclusion. He says in verse 14, "The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in darkness: but I came to realise that the same fate overtakes them both." Wisdom can't stop death. He says in verse 16, "Like the fool, the wise man too must die!" This robs wisdom and knowledge of total fulfilment.

The last thing many try to find meaning in life is Employment. But even a good job brings its own problems. Solomon says in verse 23, "All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless." It is good to be employed and do a good days work. But do not look to your employment to bring you deep satisfaction and purpose. The employment situation is so uncertain these days and prospects can be dashed leaving you disappointed. Real meaning is found in a life committed to Jesus Christ. Jesus said, concerning the necessary things of life, in Matthew 6 verse 33, "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given you as well."

So if Pleasure, Laughter, Drink, Possessions, Wisdom and Employment do not bring a sense of purpose to our lives, what does? Solomon tells us in verses 24 and 25 were we read, "This too I see is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" Augustine said, "There is a God-shaped void in each of us that only God can fill." When God is in the centre of your life then you will know meaning and purpose in your life. Without Him life is a meaningless routine. Ask the Lord to be your Saviour and friend. Walking with Jesus brings contentment that the world can never provide.

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### Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Three

Is it possible to live in this world with a sense of purpose and fulfilment? Solomon says it is, as long as God is the centre of your life. One benefit of knowing God is that it brings a real sense of stability and security to your life. This time we look at chapter three of Ecclesiastes. This chapter shows us two Bible truths that are a tremendous benefit in today's turbulent world. We discover how we can find purpose even in difficult times. It is when you are going through problems that you ask the question, "Why?"

Solomon shares two truths that will inject strength into your soul. The first is that God is sovereign. Verses 1 to 8 of chapter 3 are probably the best known verses in the book of Ecclesiastes. We read in verse 1, "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven." Then a list follows of all the various circumstances we face in life. Verse 4 says there is, "A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." These verses teach us that nothing ever happens by chance. Each event is appointed by God, and is under his sovereign control. We read in verse 14, "God does it". This is proven in verse 2. We read there, "a time to be born and a time to die." Did you have any control over the time of your birth? Of course not! Will you have any control over the day you die? No! The events of life are in the hands of God. We do not believe in coincidence. Nothing is accidental. Nor do we believe in fatalism. God appoints the time for all things. That is a comforting truth in a confused world that is constantly changing. God is at work fulfilling his purposes for his glory and the well-being of his people. God is not responsible for the sin in the world. That is caused by man's stubborn selfishness and rejection of the Gospel. But even then God can turn that around to further his purposes. We see this concerning the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We read in Acts 2 verse 22, "This man was handed over to you by Gods set purpose and foreknowledge; and you with the help of wicked men, put him to death on the cross." Now it is easier for you to accept that God is at work in your life when all is going well. Solomon speaks of days of planting, healing, building and mending. But what about the difficult times? What purpose is here in tearing down, weeping, or mourning that Solomon speaks about as well. How can these times be profitable for me? The answer is in verse 11. We read, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." We might not see times of difficulty as beautiful, but they are. In God's purposes they are, as they are used in the hands of the potter to make something lovely from the clay for his praise. He uses all the various issues of life. In our opinion an operation may not be beautiful. Redundancy, illness, pressure and stress, family problems, how can these be beautiful? You say, "I can't see it", but God can. He sees the end result. There is a poem and it goes like this: "My life is just a weaving between my God and me, I do not choose the colours He weaveth steadily. Oft times He weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride, forget He sees the upper and I the underside. Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why. The dark threads are as needful in the skilful weavers hand, as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned." How then should we respond? Verse 12 says, "I know that there is nothing better for a man than to be happy." Rejoice in the midst of your problems. God is doing a great and necessary work in your life. We read in the same verse, "do good while they live." Make the best of things that come your way. Use your days, not in complaining, but in doing good to others. Verse 13 says, "that every man may find satisfaction in his toil." Be thankful for all the good you get from your labour. Look on the bright side of life. Think of all the blessings God has given you. Acknowledge the perfection of God's ways in your life. Verse 14 says, "I know that everything God does will endure for ever, nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God does it that men may revere Him." Our response to God's ways in our lives should be a reverent spirit of worship and trust.

The second truth that will give us a sense of purpose in life is that God is Judge. Verse 15 begins the Teacher's second main sermon and takes us to chapter 5 verse 20. Verse 15 says, "God will call the past into account." There is going to be a day of judgement. Have you ever felt that there have been injustices in life that have never been sorted out? You

hear of some people who seem to be getting away with things. Solomon noticed that. He said in verse 16, "In the place of judgement wickedness was there." He saw corruption in high places of society. The offenders appeared to be getting away with it. It is frustrating when you see that happen. Solomon consoled his heart by remembering that man will not escape God's justice. He says in verse 17, "God will bring to judgement both the righteous and the wicked." Some people laugh at the idea of a judgement day. Solomon shows how they think. He shows it in verse 19, "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both." There is no thought of an after life and giving account to God. Verse 20 shows their reasoning. We read, "All go to the same place, all come from dust, and to dust all return." We will live with purpose when we know that we will have to give an account to God of all that we have done. That will prompt us to live in a way that is pleasing to God. This is the most fulfilling lifestyle anyone can lead. We read in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 10, "For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad." A lot of frustrations with the injustices of life are easier to deal with when you know that no one gets away with anything. We read in Hebrews 9 verse 27, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement." Turn from your sin and corruption now. Seek God's forgiveness. Be sure to face Him on that judgement day as a sinner cleansed in the blood of Jesus Christ. If you are a believer, be assured that every crime against God and humanity will be exposed to God's judgement and justice. The sovereignty of God and the justice of God give life meaning in a world full of trials and injustice.

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### Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Three

As we saw last time, chapter 3 verse 15 begins the second of four sermons from the Teacher. It concludes at chapter 5 verse 20. Solomon is dealing with the problem of meaninglessness. He is showing how it is possible to find meaning in today's world. We now look at chapter four. In this book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon looks at life from the position of the unsaved and then the saved. Chapter three ended with Solomon showing the thinking of the unsaved about the after life and the day of judgement. As far as they are concerned they don't exist. So the end of chapter three said, in verse 21, "Who knows if the spirit of the man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth?" Because the unbeliever has this view, he lives for this life and all it offers without any thought for eternal things. Chapter 4 shows that because he is not convinced that anything lies beyond this life, he decides to make the best of it without God. What does he find as he lives life in that way?

He has to conclude that life is a meaningless struggle. He says in 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." In his more depressed moments he feels life is not worth living. It is better to be dead. He says in verses 2 and 3, "I declared that the dead who had already died, are happier than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun." Do you feel that same sense of utter futility about life? Are you disillusioned as you look at life? Without God in your life you have no real answers. The believer knows the joy of being able to take his burdens and cast them on the Lord. The Christian has the comfort of the presence of the Lord when life gives him a knock.

Solomon depicts the unbeliever's response to his daily work. In verse 4 he says, "And I saw that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour." We call this keeping up with the Jones'! There is such a jealous competitiveness, Solomon observes, that nothing is achieved. Rather, it brings envy which eats away inside and makes you miserable. He says, at the end of verse 4, "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

Solomon shows two attitudes toward daily work at both extremes of the scale. He sees the lazy person. He is idle and does not want to work. We read in verse 5, "The fool folds his hands and ruins himself." His excuse is in verse 6, "Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil." He wants an easy quiet life! But he ruins himself because he has nothing in the end. Surely there is no fulfilment in that. Verse 6 says that this is "chasing after the wind". The Bible teaches the importance of diligence in working to provide for yourself and your family. We read in 1 Timothy 5 verse 8, "If anyone does not provide for his own relations, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." The Christian work ethic brings a sense of responsibility and purpose to everyday living.

At the other extreme we have the workaholic. We read in verse 8 about a man and "there was no end to his toil". He never stopped. Every moment was taken up with his job. We are told at the beginning of verse 8, "There was a man all alone". Why? Because he was so consumed with his business that he had no time to forge friendships, attend church, or even spend quality time with his family. Eventually he sees the bad affect it is having on his life. He says at the end of verse 8, "Why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" Many a man has ruined his marriage because of being consumed by his work. Christian friendship is missed because you are so preoccupied with your business that you are never at Church. Solomon shows the benefits of friendships. He says in verse 10, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up." In verse 12 he says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves; a cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Get your life into a biblical perspective and balance. You will lose a lot of the precious things in life if you don't. This can only lead to frustration and emptiness in the end.

Then Solomon notices the instability of position in life, and the fickleness of the crowd. In verse 13 Solomon refers to a poor, wise youth who is made king. He says in verse 14, "The youth may have come from prison to the kingship." The youth has support and a good following. He grows old and will not accept advice. He loses his support. The people favour another youth and they make him king. We read in verse 15, "I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor." The lesson is this: promotion at work, position in society, and personal popularity can be short lived. Some think that if they get into a position of power and influence they will be totally satisfied and complete. They achieve it only to find there is a management reshuffle, or a change of company direction, and they lose their position or, even worse, they lose their job. Those who were with you are now against you. Life is so changeable. Personal circumstances can alter over night! There is no guarantee that what you have today will be yours tomorrow. It is foolish to make popularity and success your aim because they are so fickle, and unreliable. What should be your goal? John tells us in 1 John 2 verse 16, "For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has or does - comes not from the Father but from the world." He concludes, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever." Now that is worth having isn't it? Making God's will your aim and delight will bring real meaning to life. Your circumstances will change, but you can be secure and content in the Saviour! Follow the Lord and know a lasting unchanging peace in a changing world.

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Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Five

Are you searching for meaning and purpose in life? Then the message of the book of Ecclesiastes is for you! Solomon has shown in chapters three and four that a real sense of purpose in life cannot be found in this passing world. So can true happiness and joy ever be found? The answer is yes, but only in a relationship with the Lord. Chapter 5 shows us how. In verse 20 Solomon says this about the person who knows God, "God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart". This gladness of heart is experienced by all those who make a wise use of the Lord's day and a wise use of the weekday. That is the theme of this chapter. Matthew Henry, the well known Bible commentator, said, "If we can learn out of this chapter how to manage the business of religion, and the business of the world -which two make up most of our time - so that both may turn to a good account, and neither our Sabbath days or our weekdays may be lost, we shall have reason to say, we have learned two good lessons."

Consider first, the wise use of the Lord's day. We read in verse 1, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." It seems that many will go anywhere but Church today. Yet it is in a Bible preaching church where you will hear things that will lead you to a personal relationship with God and that will transform your life. Along with the decline in church attendance has come a decline in morals and an increase in immorality and evil. God's house represents God's presence, and seeking God's presence is the first step to real joy. It is in his house that God is pleased to speak to us. So verse 1 says "go near to listen". This is what it means to "guard your steps." Attend Gods house and do so without arrogance, but with a humble, teachable spirit. You are coming into the presence of Almighty God. The wise person is the one who will listen to what God has got to say. How does God speak in his house? He speaks through his word the Bible. He uses Bible preachers to declare his word. Jesus said in John 7 verse 17, "Sanctify them by your truth, your word is truth." Paul said to Timothy, the young preacher, in 2 Timothy 4 verse 2, "Preach the word".

Two dangers must be avoided as you attend Gods house. You must avoid being a fool. We read in verse 1, "Listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools." The Bible teaches the importance and centrality of the preaching and teaching of God's word. The sacrifice of fools is anything that replaces the preaching of God's word and distracts from it. It also includes anything in church life that is offered to God, such as rituals, ceremonies, practices, traditions that are not found in God's word. Be sure that what you believe and practice has the support of the Bible. You must also avoid hypocrisy. Verse 2 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth...to utter anything before God." When God speaks to your heart through his word and you promise to do something about it, then do it. Verse 4 says, "When you make a vow do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow." A vow is a voluntary offering or a commitment to do something you have promised God. What promises have you made to God? Are you keeping them? Did you promise to tithe your income; be hospitable to your fellow brothers and sisters in church; be more supportive of your church and its activities; to be more holy and less worldly? Have you paid your vows? Jesus said in Matthew 7 verse 24, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practise is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." Someone once said, "Lip labour is lost labour!" The end of verse 7 shows us what will help us to be wise and genuine believers. We read, "Stand in awe of God." Reverence Him and his word. When you do this then you will be careful to be diligent in all that God requires of you as revealed in his word.

The second step to fulfilment and purpose is to consider the wise use of the weekday. To experience real gladness of heart you must keep a loose grip on the world. In verses 8 to 20 we find the keys to maintaining the joy of the Lord in your work-a-day world of activities. First, do not seek prominence and high things. We read in verse 8, "For one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still." This is said

in the context of the oppression of the poor. There is injustice, and the rights of the poor are denied by those in high office. There is nothing wrong with advancing in your job. The danger is that the higher you go the more pressure you are put under to conform to the questionable practices of the system. If you climb the ladder of success in your employment commit your way to the Lord, remain just and honourable, and you will know God's presence and help. You will also enjoy true job satisfaction.

Do not be a lover of money. Verse 10 says, "Whoever loves money never has money enough. That is because, contrary to popular belief, although money is necessary to pay your way, it does not satisfy the deep needs of the human heart. So verse 10 goes on to say, "Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income."

Avoid living for possessions. Verse 11 says, "As goods increase so do those who consume them. And what profit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them." Possessions come and go. You have them then they are consumed either by you or the family and friends. They are subject to loss, deterioration, even theft. It is futile to pin your hopes for contentment on things that are so changeable and passing. Jesus said in Matthew 6 verse 19, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Solomon lists the consequences of living for position, money, and possessions. Verse 12 says, "The abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep." That is because material possessions bring with them worry and anxiety. The rich fool said in Luke 12 verse 17, "What shall I do?" He was up all night wondering about how he could keep his wealth secure! Verse 13 says, "I have seen...wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner." Wealth can harm you by making you feel self secure and feel no need for trust in God. Jesus said in Luke 13 verse 22, "The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful."

Are you searching for real joy? Then attend God's house, hear his word and obey it. Avoid the temptations you see around you in the week to live for money, position, and possessions. Keep your eyes on Jesus Christ.

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Six

We look this time at chapter 6 of the book of Ecclesiastes. This chapter begins the third of Solomon's four sermons. It takes us from chapter 6 verse 1 to chapter 8 verse 13. Again Solomon follows his familiar pattern of contrasting the outlook of the unsaved with that of the believer. This sixth chapter highlights some reasons why the unsaved person, who does not love and serve God, is foolish for looking to this world for his satisfaction and fulfilment. Solomon calls this an evil. He says in verse 1, "I have seen another evil under the sun." Anything that distracts you from knowing and serving God is an evil thing because it is robbing you of the best thing in life. There is nothing better than fellowship with God.

The first reason is the suddenness of death. Solomon's days were days of peace and prosperity for Israel. This brought plenty of money and possessions. Men and women were living for their own comfort. They sought after pleasure. Many had all their hearts desired. Solomon mentions one man like that. He says in verse 2, "God gives a man wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead." Our life and times are determined by God. He sustains us every day. The reason the man does not enjoy his possessions is that he suddenly dies. Therefore, others take them for themselves. God brings his days to an end. That is God's prerogative as the giver and sustainer of life. Your death can take place at any time. Life is fragile. Do not assume you have got tomorrow. Jesus told the story of a rich man. The rich man thought he was here for ever! He said in Luke 12 verse 19, "And I'll say to myself, 'you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'." But listen to what God said to him. We read in verse 20, "God said 'you fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you'." Material possessions will not stop death when it comes. Riches do not guarantee a long life. The problem with a materialistic attitude is that it leads to a false sense of security. How foolish indeed to live for the things of this passing world, and to be unprepared for death and meeting your maker.

The second reason why it is foolish to look to the world for contentment is because of the emptiness it brings. The man before us lives for his possessions. His life is pictured in a very sobering way. He is likened to a still born child. Verse 3 says, "I say that a stillborn child is better off than he is." The still born child is dead. He never sees light. Verse 4 says, "It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded." There is nothing but darkness and disappointment. So it is with you if you leave the Lord out of your life. You are dead in sin. You are in spiritual darkness. You have no life because real life is found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In reality, the still born child is better off than you are. He has never had to experience the toil and aggravation of living in this world, with all its disappointments and problems! He has only ever known rest. Whereas, with all your possessions you have experienced sadness and emptiness. It is important to note here that stillborn children are at rest. Have you lost a child in infancy? Maybe you have wondered whether your child is in heaven. The answer is yes! He or she is at rest in the arms of Jesus!

The lifestyle of the unsaved person is shown in verse 7. We read, "All man's efforts are for his mouth." The unbeliever lives for himself. His main concern is for the comfort of the body and selfish satisfaction. But does this bring fulfilment? The verse goes on to say, "Yet his appetite is never satisfied." I know that the world has failed to bring you deep contentment. How do I know? Because you are constantly looking for new things to fulfil your life. Verse 9 calls this the "roving of the appetite". You are never satisfied with what you have got. You are constantly looking for more. There is an emptiness in your heart because the pleasures of the world fail you every time. Listen to what God says to you in Isaiah 55 verses 1 to 3, "Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come and buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not

satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live." Need I say more about where true fulfilment and contentment can be found?

The third reason why it is foolish to look to the world, and not God, for fulfilment and meaning, is your mortality. Verse 10 says, "What man is has been made known." The nature of man has been made known in Genesis 2 verse 7. We read, "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground." We are frail creatures made by God's almighty hand! God is stronger than we are. Verse 10 says, "No one can contend with one who is stronger than he is." The sinner attempts to contend with God. You think you know better than God. You believe that in increasing your possessions you will find real joy and peace, but it eludes you. All you experience is an increasing lack of fulfilment. Stop contending with God. Submit to his wisdom. Let Him direct and control your life. He knows what makes us tick! He knows how to give meaning to life. We are mortal and frail as dust. He is the sovereign, all powerful Lord of the universe. Give Him the reins of your life, and find true satisfaction in following God's will.

The last reason why it is foolish to look to the world for meaning, is the brevity of life. Verse 12 says, "For who knows what is good for man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?" We do not know what is around the next corner. We need to be sure we have the right resources to cope with the changing experience of life. The best resources are those that are found in the Lord. He can equip us so that we can deal with every contingency. A well known Bible teacher, H. C. Leupold put it like this, "What the next turn in the road will bring is completely hidden from man. Why then make extensive preparations along one line, like amassing riches, if a man has no knowledge as to whether that will happen to be the thing he should really have acquired? He may later require patience, but laid up a stock of gold. He may require strength of character, but all he has is a strong fortune. His particular situation may call for Christian hope, but his hope is built on uncertain riches. Such a situation is downright calamity." So, look to the Lord as your guide through life. You will be rich indeed as you do!

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Seven

I wonder how many times you have said, "I really want to get the best out of life" ? It's important you do, after all you only get one shot at it! Solomon shows us how to live with meaning and purpose as he takes us through the book of Ecclesiastes. The best life is the one devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ. We read in 1 John 2 verse17, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever." Someone once said, "Only one life will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last". We are looking at chapter seven this time. Here Solomon shows us the keys to enjoying a purposeful life living in the will of God. He is looking at life as a believer and shows the way to meaningful contentment as we travel life's journey.

The first key is be godly. Verse 1 says, "A good name is better than fine perfume." Fine perfume represents all the pleasures and delights of the world. It is better to have a good name before God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. It is better to have a good name before men and women, and to be known as a Christian, than go with the crowd to a lost eternity. Living a godly life in Jesus brings deep satisfaction.

The second key is be serious. Verse 2 says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting." Is Solomon really saying it is better to go to a funeral than to a party? He can't be serious! He is! The house of mourning is a place of seriousness, thoughtfulness, and sobriety. It is there that we are confronted with the stark reality of death, and dying. The cup of death is being passed on from person to person. Verse 2 says, "The living should take this to heart." Give serious thought to your own death. Be sure you know the one who is the resurrection and the life. The house of feasting is a place of frivolity. It distracts you from giving serious thought to these weighty matters of death, the after life, and the needs of your soul.

The next key is be sensitive. Verse 5 says, "It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools." Be sensitive to wise counsel. Taking heed of good biblical, spiritual advice will enrich your walk with God. This will inevitably deepen purpose in life. It is more pleasing to listen to a nice song than a word of rebuke. But the word of rebuke from the wise is better for your soul. The fool's words are described in verse 6. We read, "Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools." They make a great noise and a good fire, but only for a little while. Soon it is gone and scatters to ashes. There is no lasting heat; no lasting benefit. Wise spiritual advice will carry you through this life and into the next!

The fourth key is be humble. We read in verse 8, "The end of a matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride." We will find it easier to live through difficult times when we wait patiently for the Lord. Don't ever think you know better than God and take matters into your own hands. This is pride leading to arrogance. Living with purpose involves submitting to God and his ways in your life. It is being confident that He will work all things out in the end. This brings a real deep peace in all the circumstances you face in life. We read in verse 13, "Consider what God has done, who can straighten what He has made crooked?". So Solomon gives some good sound direction. We read in verse 14, "When times are good be happy, but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other". Give the appropriate response to the different providences of God in your life. This will give your life a sense of purposeful direction.

Another key we find is, be careful. We read in verses 16 to 18, "Do not be over- righteous neither be over wise - why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool - why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes." What is Solomon saying here to help us? Live a righteous life, but be governed by discernment. Matthew Henry, the Bible commentator, said, "There may be overdoing in well doing." That can happen when your zeal isn't guided by knowledge. You can damage the effect of your testimony because

you come over as an extremist or fanatic. You can also endanger your own health by an imbalanced zeal, hence the warning not to destroy yourself. Being overwise really means being a little full of yourself and being big-headed; a bit of a faultfinding know-it-all! That attitude leads to futility. When Solomon says, "Do not be overwicked", he is not saying we should get involved in wickedness. He is simply saying that all conditions that are bad for us must be avoided. We must develop a balanced life of godliness. How can we avoid these extremes? We read in verse 18, "The man who fears God will avoid all extremes." This gets us off the tightrope and puts everything in perspective. We need that wisdom that comes from God to live a well ordered holy life.

The sixth key to living with purpose is be realistic. Verse 20 says, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." Even Christians can disappoint us. Often it is our own fault because we sometimes expect perfection from our Christian friends. It is not long before we find they are far from perfect! False expectations of them can make us think life is futile when they fail us. To avoid this, remember we are all sinners saved by grace. We are on the road together and we are all growing in sanctification. We are all struggling with sin. Solomon says in verse 29, "This only have I found, God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." We are in a fallen world. God has taken the broken pieces of our lives and is making something good from them. Seeing this helps us to avoid a sense of futility as we recall that the Lord is at work in us for his glory.

I trust you are living out the will of God in your lives. It will bring real purpose to every day of your life as you develop the attitudes we have looked at in this lesson.

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Eight

Most people will do something when they know it is good for them. You will exercise because you know it will keep you healthy. God wants to do you good. He tells us in the book of Ecclesiastes how we can get the best out of life. That is a good thing isn't it? We will get the best out of life when we listen to, and put into practice, that wisdom that comes from God. We find it in the Bible. We are looking at chapter eight of the book of Ecclesiastes. Here Solomon shows us the benefit of getting wisdom from God.

The first thing we notice is that wisdom from God brings us personal benefit. Verse 1 says, "Who is like a wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance." Have you got deep searching questions that still remain unanswered? Questions like, "Why am I here? Where is the world heading?" and especially, "What is the purpose of life and how can I find it?" The person who knows God has got a sound explanation and knows the answer to these nagging questions. The man with God's wisdom knows the explanation of things. Because of this he is a happy person. Wisdom "brightens a man's face." God's wisdom, experienced in Jesus Christ, is so clear and helpful that it takes the strain out of living. The answers that God gives to life's issues in the Bible are very satisfying. They bring peace to the heart. They produce a real joy too. Is your brow furrowed with worry, care and anxiety? Are your problems weighing you down? You need that wisdom from above that will lift your soul and mind. You need the answers that God supplies. We read in 2 Peter 1 verses 3-4, "(God's) divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in this world caused by evil desires."

The second thing we notice is that God's wisdom brings us practical benefit. It helps us to think right, and behave correctly as we live in the world. Solomon applies this to a few areas of life to show us how it works. Wisdom helps us to relate in a godly way to government. Verse 2 says, "Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God." The king's commands are the laws he has introduced. Some of us may not live under the rule of one sovereign king, but we do live under a divinely ordained government. We read in Romans 13 verse 1, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." We must be good, law abiding citizens. That is good for us because it brings us the commendation of the rulers. Christians must be seen to be responsible, honest people. The only exception to this is where there is a conflict between the law of the land and God's law. We have to say at such a time what Peter said to the rulers of his day. We read in Acts 4 verse 19, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God."

Wisdom helps us to respond positively to life's uncertainties. Verse 7 says, "Since no man knows the future who can tell what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the day of his death." The future is concealed by God. We don't know what tomorrow might bring. It could even be our death! The wisdom God gives in the Bible helps us to exercise the right judgement in every situation. There is a successful format to life's experiences. With God and his word we can deal with all that life brings. When we do what he says in a certain situation all will be well.

Wisdom helps us react spiritually to life's injustices. Verse 12 says, "Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God." Two areas of wickedness are highlighted. Verse 9 says, "There is a time when a man lords it over others." There are those who oppress the weak. Verse 11 says, "When the sentence for a crime is not carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong". There are

some who see that crime isn't dealt with and so go on to do worse things. God's wisdom is better because it leads us to a life of care and honesty. This does other people good and keeps us from prison and punishment. It goes better for God-fearing men because we receive the blessing of God for our obedience to Him. We also know we will inherit eternal life. It won't go well with those who do not fear God. Solomon says in verse 13, "their days will not lengthen as a shadow." They will not enjoy the length of days in heaven. They will experience an accusing conscience, and guilt before God.

Wisdom helps us to deal properly with the challenge of daily living. Life appears to be unfair. Solomon says in verse 14, "Righteous men get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men get what the righteous deserve". We don't fully understand the great complexities of life. Only God has the explanation for these apparent peculiarities. Job suffered and Jacob limped. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. Trophimus was left at Miletus sick. Solomon says in verse 17, "Then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning." So what does wisdom say? Don't allow any of this to become a stumbling block to following God. Verse 15 says, "I commend the enjoyment of life." Make the best of all that God has given you, and be content. The verse goes on to say, "Nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad." Get on with your daily living. Be confident in the wise plan of God for your life no matter what comes your way. Rather than grumble at God, rest in his wise providences. This is the way to real joy. Verse 15 ends by saying, "Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun."

So, receiving and applying God's wisdom to your life brings all those benefits. I hope you are reading your Bible regularly. You will be blessed as you do, and as you put what you have read into practice.

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Nine

Handling life does not come easy. We all need as much help and guidance as we can get. God wants us to live life with a real sense of purpose. In the book of Ecclesiastes He gives us all the insight we need to live life successfully. We look today at chapter 9. This chapter falls within the fourth and final sermon of the Teacher. It began in chapter 8 verse 14 and ends at chapter 12 verse 7.

The key statement in this ninth chapter is found at the beginning of verse 10. We read, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." You will be motivated to have this attitude when what you do is meaningful. This is good advice for any believer in his service for God. Keep yourself occupied with pleasing God, and following Jesus Christ. Do it with all your strength. Put every bit of energy and commitment into it. Love and serve other believers in the same way. Show Christ's love to everyone with a fervent spirit. Jesus said in Mark 12 verse 31, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." We read in Galatians 6 verse 10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We are to do all of this with all our might. Whatever we do, spiritual or secular, do it well, do it diligently, and do it to please the Lord. This links in with Ephesians 5 verses 15 and 16. We read, "Be very careful then how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil." Time is short. It is passing quickly. Do what needs to be done today. Why does God speak to us like this? Why this emphasis on taking the opportunity now, today? Solomon gives us the answer.

An event may overtake you and hinder you from doing what you planned. Verse 1 says, "So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands." We are subject to God's providences. They may change according to his wise purposes for our lives. Therefore, today's opportunities may be gone tomorrow. In fact similar things happen to the unsaved as to the saved. So we are not to jump to any wrong conclusions when we go through them. Solomon says at the end of verse 1, "No man knows whether love or hate awaits them". That is to say that outward circumstances alone don't necessarily tell us anything about God's attitude toward us. Good things don't suggest God loves us, because good things happen to the ungodly. Bad things don't suggest God hates us, because bad things happen to the righteous whom God loves dearly! Solomon says in verse 2, "All share a common destiny - the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad - as it is with the good man, so it is with the sinner." We know God loves us because He tells us in his word, and confirms it by his spirit in our hearts. As far as our circumstances in life are concerned, what we do know is that whatever befalls us, we are in God's hands. While you have liberty, do what needs to be done now, with all your might. Things may be different soon.

The second reason Solomon gives for us to act now is the reality of death. We read in verse 3, "The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead." Indeed, after telling us to do what we do with all our might in verse 10, he says, "for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning." A man was stood in a shop doorway and a Christian felt led to talk to him about the Lord as he walked by him. He decided against it and thought he would do it when he saw him again. He went on his way. The next day he heard that the same man had collapsed on his way home and died. Either your death, or someone else's, can frustrate your plans if you leave them to a more convenient time for you. The word "procrastinate" isn't in God's vocabulary! This is true of preparing properly for death. Verse 4 says, "Anyone who is among the living has hope." You have hope because you have now to get ready to meet God. In verse 5 we read, "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing." Solomon then makes this striking comment about the unsaved, "they have no further reward." Living for God with all your might today means that whenever death comes you are ready. Verse 12 says, "no man

knows when his hour may come." You know you are going to die, so prepare adequately for it by committing your life to the Lord Jesus Christ and his service.

You will then live in such a way that you can look forward to your heavenly reward. So, be happy in Christ, rejoice in his provision of all your needs of food, drink, and married life. Solomon says in verse 7, "Go eat your food with gladness - for it is now that God favours what you do." In verse 8 he says "Enjoy life with your wife." The happy life is the one lived in grateful thanks to God.

A further reason is given to do all you can today. Life may take an unexpected turn. We read in verse 11, "The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong." You may think that something will most certainly happen and then be disappointed. What you expected never took place. You are caught off guard and your plans are overturned. What you assumed would occur tomorrow never transpired. Don't assume anything beyond today and act accordingly. It is right to plan ahead, but remember, in the end, you are subject to those changing turns of events brought about by God. Everything is in his hands, not yours. Verse 12 says, "Men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them." Life is full of surprises! Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today! Time and opportunity will have slipped by.

Lastly, work hard to get wisdom and use it as you get opportunity. Solomon talks about a city that was saved from disaster. He says in verse 15, "Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom." Wise advice is always needed today. Pass it on today while it can be useful. The time will come when people may reject it. Verse 16 says, "his words are no longer heeded."

Do all you can today while it is here. That gives purpose to every new day. The changing scenes of time can change tomorrow's plans.

Living with Purpose.

Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of the Book of Ecclesiastes picks up the theme at the end of chapter 9 and carries it on. At the end of the ninth chapter Solomon shows the value and benefit of possessing wisdom from God. He ends the chapter by saying in verse 16, "Wisdom is better than strength." In chapter 10 he shows why that is true, and why wisdom is worth having. Solomon recommends wisdom to us. When it is used it will help us to live correctly. It will save us from many mistakes.

The first benefit of wisdom is that it helps us to behave rightly. Verse 2 says, "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left." Are you right-handed or left-handed? I think Solomon must have been right handed. He uses the picture of a right-handed man trying to do something with his left hand and making a mess of it. Godly wisdom helps you to avoid fouling up your life. Many people have made a complete mess of their lives because they would not pay attention to good spiritual advice. So verse 3 says about the fool, "Even as he walks along the road the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is." The fool wanders aimlessly about, tripping here, slipping there. There is no stability or direction in his life.

The second benefit of wisdom is that it saves you from hasty decisions. Verse 4 says, "If a ruler's anger arises against you, do not leave your post, calmness can lay great errors to rest." Here we have our responsibility to government. Solomon probably met with some insolent citizens. They may have rebelled in some way or would not pay their taxes! We are required to be good citizens. We are advised here that if we are guilty of an error, we must acknowledge it. We must not hide away from it. A calm, honest approach will bring a more favourable response from the authorities. This will create within their thinking a higher regard for us than if we ran away. They will be more inclined to "lay great errors to rest." A wrong hasty unwise reaction will make matters worse. Wisdom helps us to react to our own faults correctly.

The third benefit of wisdom is it will save us from unwise decisions. Verse 6 says, "fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones." By "rich" he means those rich in wisdom. Whoever made that decision made a foolish one. We have already seen how the "fool lacks sense". Wisdom demands that wise people are put in positions of responsibility. We have to make many decisions in life. All sorts of issues face us. There is a new challenge every day. We must always be guided by the wisdom of the Lord through his word. Paul prayed that the believers at Colosse would receive this wisdom. We read in Colossians 1 verse 9, "We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Whatever decision you have to make if your mind is full of God's word, you will not go far wrong.

The fourth benefit of wisdom is it enriches your speech. Verse 12 says, "Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the fool is consumed by his own lips." A person is known by their speech. Your choice of words reveal the real you. The wise person will be known by his sound and sober conversation. This should be the case with those who follow the Lord Jesus. We read Colossians 4 verse 6, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." Christian leaders should especially be known for this. In Titus 2 verse 8 we read, "In teaching, show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned."

The fifth benefit of wisdom is that it encourages a disciplined lifestyle. Verse 18 says, "If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle the house leaks." Are you a handy man round the house? I know some love to be making and mending! If you are not, then I am sure when there is a problem you quickly get someone in to sort it out! The lazy man looks at what needs to be done and does nothing about it. So the house stays in a

state of disrepair. Solomon refers to a lazy man's field full of thorns and weeds. He says in Proverbs 24 verses 33 and 34, "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest - and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man." Carelessness brings ruin and poverty. Diligence brings fruit and blessing. God expects his people to avoid a lazy attitude in life.

We read in 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 11, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you." This is the biblical way to earn your money, to make provision for yourself and your family. It is also necessary for your spiritual health too. In Hebrews 6 verse 1 we read, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." The exercise of faith and patience demands diligence and commitment.

The sixth benefit of wisdom is that it keeps you from holding a wrong attitude toward someone. Verse 19 says, "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say." Now you know where the saying "a little bird told me" comes from! It is amazing how well the grapevine system works! Bad feeling will be found out. It will be brought to light. It is best not to harbour bad thoughts about anyone. When rulers make a mistake, yet things are generally run well, don't be too severe in your judgement on them. Leadership is a difficult task. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 2 verses 1 and 2, "I urge then, that first of all, requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority." In the same way, leaders in the Church need your prayers not your criticisms! Paul requested the prayers of the believers at Thessalonica. He says in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 26, "Brethren, pray for us." That is the greatest service you can do for your Pastor and Elders.

Wisdom is worth having. It has so many benefits. We have looked at just a few. So get wisdom, apply it to your life. You will quickly see the difference it makes.

Living with Purpose.

Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Eleven

Today we are studying chapter 11 of the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon continues his wise counsel on how to get the best out of life. True purpose and meaning is found in seeking and applying God's wisdom to your life. There are two themes in this chapter, "How to live well" and "How to die well". We need to know how to do this to gain maximum benefit from life's journey.

Consider first, "How to live well". The greatest threat to a life of purpose found in serving God is materialism. There is nothing wrong in having possessions. We must not make the accumulation of possessions our goal. When God blesses us with them we must know how to use them so they don't become thorns which choke our spiritual growth. The advice given in the first six verses of this chapter is be generous in sharing your material benefits with those not so well off as you are. Verses 1 and 2 say, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land." "Waters" in scripture often refer to nations of people. We are to give to seven, even to eight, that is, we are to give bountifully. Having given to seven we are not to say, "Well, I've done my bit now I'll leave it to someone else". While you are able to give, then give generously at every opportunity, and to as many as possible. You don't know what problems may come tomorrow that will hinder you from giving. Give today whilst you are able to do so. Solomon gives two illustrations of the right attitude toward giving. We read in verse 3, "If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth." Clouds which are full don't hold on to their water. They pour all they have got on the ground. So we should not hold back when it is in our hand to give to the needy. We also read in that verse, "Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north in the place where it falls, there will it lie." Wherever the tree falls the people may take it and use it for their benefit for firewood or building a home. God has placed you where you are. You are to meet the needs of those with whom you come in contact. You are to benefit other people.

The end of verse 1 says, "For after many days you will find it again." That is God's promise. We often hold back. We say, "I'm on little income. I can't afford to give." Or, "I've taxes to pay and a Family to feed". Those are important obligations. Giving to the needy doesn't free you from them. But God's promise is dependable. We might not see immediately how God will accomplish his promise but He will. Verse 4 says, "Whoever watches the wind will not plant." The picture is of the farmer. He will neither sow or reap if he allows himself to be put off by adverse weather. We will not know the experience of God's blessing and provision, if we allow ourselves to be put off by the winds of our life's present circumstances. We must trust God as we obey him. Verse 5 says, "As you do not know the path of the wind - so you cannot understand the work of God." It is the picture of the sailor. He does not know when the wind will blow, or in what direction, but that does not stop him from setting his sail! How God will cause us to "find it again" is his work, not our problem! So the scripture says in

2 Corinthians 9 verse 6, "Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

There is a spiritual application to this as well. Our duty as Christians is to cast the bread of life upon the waters of the world. We are called to spread the good news of the Gospel. This is food for the hungry souls of men and women. We are to do it where God has put us. We must cast it to as many as possible. We must not allow anything to hinder us. We must preach the Gospel to every creature. We do not know who will, or will not, believe. It is God's prerogative to bring people to faith. Our responsibility is to tell them. Verse 6 says, "Sow your seed in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." We leave the results of our efforts to God. He knows what He is doing. Whether we give materially, or of the Gospel, He will accomplish his purpose in it.

Verses 7 to 10 deal with the theme of how to die well. Life is worth the living! Verse 7 says, "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun". Verse 8 says, "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all". How you use your days are very important. They don't last forever. They will soon be gone.

Psalms 90 verse 10 says, "The length of our days is seventy years - or eighty if we have the strength." Life soon passes. Solomon tells us at the end of verse 8, "But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many." Death, and the darkness of the grave, will catch up with us. He says in verse 9, "Know for all these things God will bring you into judgement." We will face God at that great judgement throne. Death and meeting God at the judgement should make us careful how we live. Solomon addresses young men. He uses a little irony. He says in verse 9, "Be happy, young man, while you are young - let your heart give you joy - follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see." This is how young people think, "I'll live for today and all that I can get out of life". Sadly it is done without any thought for God. Solomon warns, "Well that's fine. If that's your choice go ahead!". But he reminds them at the end of verse 9, "God will bring you into judgement". So it is wise to live in the light of the reality of death and of the judgement day. This will cause you to turn to God for forgiveness. It will motivate you to live for Jesus Christ today. It will prepare you for that day when you will see Him face to face. Invest your life in the service of Jesus Christ from the days of your youth. Verse 10 says, "Cast off the troubles of your body." This means get rid of anything that will hurt you and defile you in God's sight. Live a holy life for Him and you will enter into your future eternal reward.

Those who live well are those who live according to the divine plan revealed by God in the Bible. Is that true of you? Are you ready to face death and to face God? I trust that you are.

Living with Purpose.

## Studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter Twelve

We arrive now at chapter 12 of the book of Ecclesiastes. This is the last chapter of the book, and the last part of the Teacher's four sermons. Solomon is concerned about the meaninglessness of life that so many acknowledge. As the Teacher he teaches us the way to find meaning and purpose. You are never too young to learn these lessons. In fact, the younger you are when you get hold of the wisdom God gives, the more satisfying the rest of your life will be. Some think that God and the Bible are only for older people. God is concerned about young people too. Here in chapter 12 he talks to teenagers. Verse 1 says, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth". Teenager, God has got something important to say to you!

Why should you remember God in your youth? Firstly, because youthful days are the best days to seek God. These are days when your conscience is tender. As years go by the voice of conscience can grow dim if you keep rejecting its voice. So while that inner "voice" reminds you that God exists, yield to it and seek the God who is there. He can be found through faith in Jesus Christ. Youthful days are days when your heart is supple. Teenage years are formative years. You are finding your own identity. You are looking for someone, or something to identify with. Your heart is receptive to anything. So listen to the call of Jesus to follow Him. There is no better role model for teenagers to have. In your teenage years your mind is impressionable. You are open to all sorts of influences. The trials of life are few. Bitterness hasn't gripped your mind. Receive the teaching of the Bible now and let its powerful message shape your convictions and outlook on life. Its words will save you from many heartaches. Youthful days are days when you are likely to make errors of judgement. The world looks attractive. You are inclined to look there because it appears on the surface to offer all you are looking for. It is a bubble ready to burst. It is a mirage that will leave you dry and empty. Jesus said in John 4 verse 13, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst." Jesus holds out to you forgiveness and total satisfaction. You should seek God now in your early years simply because He has given you your existence. Solomon says God is your creator. You are in debt to Him for all you are and have! Thank Him for it. Seek his salvation. Serve Him out of love and thankfulness. The great Creator has become your Saviour. So you are doubly indebted to Him, and to his love and grace.

Secondly, youthful days are the best days to seek God because they will not last forever. In that first verse we read, "Before the days of trouble come." God shows you in this chapter the effects the passing of time has on you. Old age creeps upon us as youthful days draw to an end. God does not demean old age in this passage. William Phelps once said, "I know of no fallacy greater than the statement that youth is the happiest time of life. As we advance in years we really grow happier if we live intelligently. To live abundantly is like climbing a mountain or a tower. To say youth is happier than maturity is like saying the view from the bottom of the tower is better than the view from the top. As we ascend the range of our view widens immensely." That is true, but difficult days do come. What happens? Verse 2 says, "The sun and the light grow dark". Days of warmth and sunshine are over. Verse 3 says, "The keepers of the house tremble, and strong men stoop." Physical weakness increases. The "keepers" are our arms and legs which lose strength. We read, "the grinders cease because they are few". In other words we lose our teeth! Verse 3 ends by saying, "those looking through the windows grow dim". Our eyesight deteriorates. Verse 4 says, "men rise up at the sound of a bird". You don't sleep as long and wake up at the slightest noise. Also says verse 4, "their songs grow faint". Your hearing isn't what it was in earlier years. We read in verse 5, "When the almond tree blossoms". That's a reference to the time when your hair goes grey! It all ends in death. Verse 5 says, "Then man goes to his eternal home."

In verses 6 and 7, Solomon speaks of death. He says, "Remember Him - before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken - and the dust returns to the ground it came from." Solomon had a light in a golden bowl in his room suspended by a silver cord. One

day it snapped. The bowl fell to the ground and the light went out. The day is coming, after old age has done its work, that the light of your life will be switched off. It will be gone. Remember Him now in your early years. You are not promised tomorrow. Whether sooner or later you will leave this world.

God is the only one who can meet your deepest need now for forgiveness, salvation, meaning, and the assurance of life hereafter. You have an eternal soul. It is a poor bargain to neglect it for the sake of this world's so called pleasures which do not last. Jesus said in Matthew 16 verse 26, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? " Think carefully about the far-reaching implications of the choices you make in your teenage years.

Lastly, youthful days will be judged. Verse 14 says, "God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." God has given you the freedom to choose, but you will have to give an account to God one day for the choices you made. That is a sobering thought. Enough to get you to change your lifestyle in favour of following Jesus Christ.

Solomon has taught us much about life in this book. He says in verse 10, "The Teacher searched to find the right words, and what he wrote is upright and true." He gives the conclusion of the whole matter. He says in verse 13, "Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man." That is the key to living with purpose. Make that your main goal and life will be full of meaning every day of your life. God bless you as you do.