

The Conclusion of the Matter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 12.*

Memory Text: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*).

A Russian writer, Andrei Bitov, explains a seminal moment in his life: “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the metro in Leningrad, I was overcome with a despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: Without God life makes no sense. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the metro and into God’s light and carried on living.”—Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1994), p. 59.

In its own way, *Ecclesiastes* could have been summed up with the phrase “Without God life makes no sense.” But that can be read two ways, not just that if no God exists life makes no sense but that if we live without God, without acknowledging Him or His commands, life makes no sense. And that’s because, among other reasons, death is always there, waiting to swallow us up into oblivion. Without the answer to death, there’s no answer to life, and that answer is found only in Jesus, who beat death and with that victory offers us what we can’t get anywhere else. “‘Without Me,’” Jesus said, “‘you can do nothing’” (*John 15:5, NKJV*), and that includes finding any good reason for our existence.

This week we take our final look at *Ecclesiastes*, one of Scripture’s more creative ways of getting that important point across to us, who can so easily forget it.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.*

Remember Your Creator

Solomon here picks up somewhat where he left off in the previous section. He's still giving advice to young people, still warning them about the "evil days." Though last week we looked at them as being days of any kind of trouble, the emphasis here seems to be on old age. Evil days seem to be (at least in his thinking here) old age.

What is Solomon saying here in 12:1 that reflects what he said in the last few verses of Ecclesiastes 11? What's his basic message?

Solomon's use of the word for "Creator" here comes from the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1 for "created." The Hebrew verb *bara* is almost always found in the context of divine activity (*Isa. 65:17, Amos 4:13, Mal. 2:10*); that is, *bara* is never used to describe humanity's activities. Solomon, therefore, is expressing the biblical concept that ties in God as our Creator. He is our God because He is our Creator.

Also interesting is that the Hebrew word for "Creator" is in the plural, just as the word for God in Genesis 1:1 appears in the plural. Though all sorts of explanations have existed through the centuries for this plural form, some Christians have seen it as evidence of the plural nature of the Godhead (*Gen. 1:26, 3:22, 11:7*).

Solomon, having squandered the best years of his life, his youth, is now seeking to warn others from following in his footsteps. Though it's important for everyone, at any age, to accept the Lord, the earlier the better, for any number of reasons. That's clearly his message now: Don't turn away from God in your youth.

Why would it be better for someone while young to accept the Lord as opposed to waiting until later? What are the advantages of doing it while being young? Take your list to class on Sabbath and compare it with what others say. What can you learn from each other? See also Deut. 10:13; Luke 13:4, 5; Phil. 3:13, 14.

When the Grinders Cease

Ecclesiastes 12:2-7 is a beautiful and poetic description of the aging process. Many commentators agree that the phrase “before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain” (*vs. 2, NIV*) deals with the loss of mental faculties in old age. The “keepers of the house” could be the arms, which were once strong and healthy but now tremble and shake.

Read through Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. Work through the images the best you can. But as you read, also ask yourself this question: Why is Solomon here talking about old age? What’s the message for us?

Solomon, especially as he himself reaches old age, is pointing us to our mortality. This is a theme he touched on over and over in the book. And no wonder. Regardless of who we are, how we live, or even how long we live, sooner or later we all face death. It’s an unavoidable reality of life.

Some Christian youth wear a T-shirt with the saying “It’s not that life is so short but that death is so long! John 3:16.” Solomon, now in his old age, with death before him, is seeking to remind us all, especially the young, that our day will come, as well. Of course, if you are fortunate, you will live long, only to face the “evil days” of old age, and then you will die. The other option is that you will simply die young.

In short, Ecclesiastes, among other things, reminds us again of our mortality, reminds us of the shortness of life, that it is *hebel*, a vapor or a breath. Thus, we all need to keep the big picture in mind, the picture of eternity, the picture of what God has offered us through Jesus Christ—eternal life.

Read through Revelation 21 and 22, a description of the future world that God has made available to all of us through Jesus’ death. What elements stand out the most in your mind? What touches you the most? Try to imagine what it will be like. And remember that this will be for eternity. This is the hope God offers us through Christ. All this considered, what else matters? How seriously are you taking the promises offered you through Jesus?

The Making of Many Books

In Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 Solomon starts talking about wisdom, knowledge, and his attempts to teach it to others. Whether he was referring to all his writings or just that in this book, the text doesn't say. His point, though, was that he truly attempted not only to learn truth but to teach it to others.

Look at verse 10 in particular. He wanted words that were “pleasing” (*RSV*). Does that mean he simply wanted to tickle people's ears with what they wanted to hear? That hardly makes sense, considering the kind of words that he wrote, especially in Ecclesiastes. The key, perhaps, is in the rest of the verse. He sought pleasing words but also “words of truth” written “uprightly” (*RSV*). The words were not so pleasing that they ceased to be true. Ultimately, words of truth are pleasing, in the sense that truth itself—Jesus (*John 14:6*), who died for our sins—is pleasing, at least to those who know and accept Him.

Read verse 11. What point is he making there?

The “goad” mentioned here was probably a pointed stick used to prod cattle. Along with the other image of “nails,” his point seems to be that the words of the wise should have two effects: prodding people to action and staying in the memory. According to many commentators, the “one shepherd” here is a reference to God Himself (*Ps. 23:1, Jer. 31:10, John 10:11-14*); that is, in the end, the words of the wise come from God. In short, Solomon here is talking about divine inspiration. He, like other wise men and the prophets, “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (*2 Pet. 1:21*).

What's the warning in verse 12?

How interesting that right after talking about divine inspiration Solomon gives this warning about books, which is really a warning about the wrong kind of learning. How many people study themselves right into eternal ruin? Today, especially, when there is so much information out there, how crucial that we be careful about the kind of learning we get.

What kind of “knowledge” is out there that, if not tested and judged by Scripture with the teaching of the “One shepherd,” could lead you astray? Why must you be careful in the kind of knowledge you acquire?

Faith, Law, and Judgment

After going on for so long about all these matters of life, death, and God, Solomon ends this book with two verses, Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14. In your own words, summarize the essence of his conclusion.

Solomon's final message in Ecclesiastes, the sum of all that he wrote before, sounds somewhat like what's at the heart of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

Read Revelation 14:6-12. What elements can you find in there that are similar to Solomon's conclusion to Ecclesiastes?

Solomon ends by telling us to keep the commandments of God; that's part of the third angel's message (*Rev. 14:12*). Solomon talks about judgment; the first angel's message also talks about judgment (*vs. 7*). Finally, Solomon's call to "Fear God" is a Bible way of expressing what it means to have faith in God, to worship and obey Him, all part of the three angels' messages (*vss. 7-12*). The fear of God and the worship of God are linked. "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth" (*Ps. 96:9*). "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple" (*Ps. 5:7*). No wonder the first angel's message, which tells us to worship God, tells us (as did Solomon) to "fear God," as well.

Thus the three basic elements in Solomon's conclusion are crucial elements in what we understand as present truth. Does this mean, then, that Solomon was thinking specifically of our time when inspired to write this? Of course not. Instead, this brings home a crucial point: From the beginning, God's message of faith in His atonement for us, reflected in a life of obedience to His commandments, all against the backdrop of a judgment, is nothing new. As Adventists we didn't invent it. We've just been given the call to preach it to the world.

If you were to explain to someone what it means to fear God and keep His commandments, what would you say?

The Conclusion of the Matter

We've come to the end, the conclusion of the conclusion of our study in Ecclesiastes. What is the meaning of this strange book, which is so different from almost every other book of the Bible? What's the message God has for us here? What are we to make of this?

Go back over the book of Ecclesiastes. Mull over it, pray over it, and then write out what you would deem the key point of this book. What was God's message to you from Ecclesiastes? What have you taken away that helps you better in your walk with the Lord? Be prepared to read your answer in class on Sabbath.

It will be interesting to see the various responses. One point, though, does seem clear: God, with this book, warns us against getting too caught up in the ways of the world. Sure, we have been given bodies, we have been given physical pleasures; these are all gifts from God, and they all have their role. But they are not the end; in and of themselves, they are all *hebel*. As you get older, your ability to enjoy them diminishes, and the moment you die they are gone.

In other words, whatever else Ecclesiastes is saying to us, it is at least saying, Think about who you are, why you are here, how you got here, and, most important, where you are going when this short life, this *hebel* of existence, is gone. God has given us gifts, but the gifts don't last; nothing in this life does.

Ecclesiastes is 12 chapters saying to us what Jesus said in one verse: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (*Matt. 16:26*). Sadly, what people give for their own soul is, always, *hebel*. How tragic, especially when our souls have already been bought, bought through the precious blood of Jesus, whose death offers all of us a one-way ticket out of all the "madness and folly" that we suffer here "under the sun."

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 113; book 3, p. 405; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 455.

“Human strength is weakness, human wisdom is folly. Our success does not depend on our talents or learning, but on our living connection with God. The truth is shorn of its power when preached by men who are seeking to display their own learning and ability. Such men display also that they know very little of experimental religion, that they are unsanctified in heart and life and are filled with vain conceit. They do not learn of Jesus. They cannot present to others a Savior with whom they themselves are not acquainted. Their own hearts are not softened and subdued by a vivid sense of the great sacrifice which Christ has made to save perishing man.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 158, 159.

“You need not go to the ends of the earth for wisdom, for God is near. It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. We need to have far less confidence in what man can do and far more confidence in what God can do for every believing soul. He longs to have you reach after Him by faith. He longs to have you expect great things from Him. He longs to give you understanding in temporal as well as in spiritual matters. He can sharpen the intellect. He can give tact and skill. Put your talents into the work, ask God for wisdom, and it will be given you.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 146.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, go over your answers in Thursday’s lesson and discuss your conclusions.
- 2 Have people of different ages get up and talk about the aging process. What do we learn about life, about God, about faith, as we get older? What lessons can the older ones teach the young?
- 3 What are the things in your society that make it so easy to get caught up in the world? As a class, how can you help each other avoid these pitfalls?
- 4 As a church, how well do we help our members discern between what’s eternal and what’s *hebel*? That is, might we even subtly be promoting things—i.e., wealth, power, prestige, knowledge—in ways that can blur the line between what’s gold and what’s dross? Discuss.

Search for Father

by IGOR KORAL

I grew up in a non-Christian family in Ukraine. My father was in prison during most of my childhood. When other children talked about their fathers, I felt left out, lonely. I did not remember my father. My mom did her best to be mother and father to me, but the incompleteness of our family was a sharp pain in my heart.

This yearning for a father pushed me to search for God. When I visited my grandmother, she took me to church and taught me to pray. She told me stories about God, my heavenly Father. There was that word again, *father*. Could God be my Father? The thought seemed so dear yet so distant.

I prayed with Grandmother when I was little, and as I grew I began talking to God about everything. Slowly, God became my Father. My faith in God—my Father—helped me stand firm when my teenage friends urged me to drink and smoke. I could not dishonor my heavenly Father.

I often read a book of prayers and Bible readings that Grandmother had given me. There I found references to the Sabbath. I did not understand what Sabbath meant, but I determined to keep the Sabbath the best I knew how. It brought me such peace and happiness during this time in my life.

Then when I was 15, my father was released from prison. He wanted to spend time with me, get to know me. I felt honored. He introduced me to his friends—criminals and ex convicts with fancy tattoos and big talk about crimes and prison. I was drawn to these men, and before long I wanted to be like them. This pleased my father, for he wanted me to follow his footsteps. But before I could sink too deeply into trouble, my father died in a swimming accident.

A few months later I saw a poster advertising Christian meetings. I had lost my connection with God, and I wanted to reconnect. But something held me back. My mind was in a turmoil. I attended the last few meetings. The speaker talked about how much God loves us and wants us to be His children. Then he invited us to follow Christ and be baptized. I knew I had to obey. I stood and surrendered my life to Jesus once more.

Today I cannot imagine living without God. I want to be like Him, just as a little boy wants to be like his earthly father. I want my Father to be proud of me.

Your Mission offerings help pay for outreach such as the meetings that brought me back to God. Thank you.

IGOR KORAL is a lay evangelist and church planter in Ukraine.

This quarter's study, *Thy Word Is a Lamp Unto My Feet: The Bible for Today*, written by the Jonathan Oey Kuntaraf and Kathleen Kiem Hoa Oey Kuntaraf, shows us the great lengths God has taken to reveal, not only Himself to us but also His ultimate standard of truth for this fallen world. Perhaps the greatest evidence for the Bible is the influence and impact for good it has had, and continues to have, on the lives of those who apply its teachings to their daily lives. For centuries, the Bible has provided answers to the greatest needs of people all over the world. With such claims made for the Bible, is there any wonder why its authenticity and reliability have been challenged? This quarter attempts to answer some of the Bible's critics and show just how relevant it is for us today.

Lesson 1—The Voice from Heaven

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: God's Search for Humanity (*Gen. 3:8, Isa. 59:2, Matt. 23:37*)

MONDAY: God and the Prophets (*2 Sam. 12:1-7*)

TUESDAY: The Revelation Through Jesus Christ (*Matt. 11:27*)

WEDNESDAY: God Speaks Today (*2 Tim. 1:5*)

THURSDAY: God Speaks Through the Bible (*2 Pet. 1:20, 21*)

Memory Text—*Hebrews 1:1, 2*

Sabbath Gem: Our true worth can be understood only through the life and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If our value wasn't infinite in the sight of God, such an infinite price would not have been paid for our redemption. God still speaks to us today, but we need to make sure we are listening.

Lesson 2—"The Final Word"

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: "The Word of the Lord" (*2 Sam. 23:2; Ezek. 2:2; 11:5, 24; Mic. 3:8*)

MONDAY: God-breathed (*2 Tim. 3:16*)

TUESDAY: Christ's View of the Scriptures (*Matt. 4:4-10*)

WEDNESDAY: Apostles and the Scriptures (*James 2*)

THURSDAY: Unity Amid Diversity (*2 Pet. 3:16*)

Memory Text—*2 Timothy 3:16, 17*

Sabbath Gem: As Christians, we believe that God is the final authority and that He expresses His will through His Word, the Bible. Thus considering who its author is, the Bible comes with God's divine authority built into its very pages.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, old age, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.