

A man and a young child are walking away from the viewer on a beach at sunset. The man is on the right, holding the child's hand. The child is on the left, reaching out towards the water. The sky is a vibrant orange and yellow, with the sun low on the horizon. The ocean waves are visible in the foreground and middle ground. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

ECCLESIASTES

and

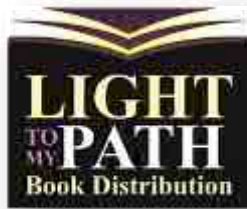
SONG of SOLOMON

Reflections on Life and Love

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

Ecclesiastes and **Song of Solomon**

**Old Testament Reflections
on Life and Love**



F. Wayne Mac Leod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, NS CANADA

Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon

Copyright © 2012 by F. Wayne Mac Leod

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used with permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers, All rights reserved.)

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved

Scriptures marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible

Special thanks to the proof readers and reviewers without whom this book would be much harder to read:

Diane Mac Leod, Suzanne St. Amour

Table of Contents

Preface to Ecclesiastes	1
Introduction to Ecclesiastes	3
1 Meaningless	5
2 The Futility of Pleasure	11
3 The Futility of Wisdom and Her Works	17
4 A Time for Everything	23
5 Revere God	29
6 Justice	35
7 Oppression and Greed	40
8 The Blessing and Fragility of Companionship	44
9 The Sins of the Mouth	50
10 Materialism and Injustice	55
11 Enjoyment of Possessions	60
12 Accepting the Inevitable	67
13 Sorrow and Mourning	72
14 General Observations on Life	78
15 More Observations on Life	85
16 Respect for Authority	92
17 The Injustice and Uncertainties of Life	96
18 The Common Destiny of all Humans	102
19 The Race is not for the Swift	107
20 The Consequences to Our Actions	111

21 Work Hard and Give Generously	119
22 Remember Your Creator	126
Preface to Song of Solomon.....	134
Introduction to Song of Solomon	136
23 The Beloved's Desire	139
24 Green Beds and Cedar Beams.....	144
25 Do Not Awaken Love.....	150
26 Little Foxes.....	156
27 Lost and Found	161
28 Out of the Wilderness.....	165
29 You are Beautiful.....	169
30 Drink Your Fill, O Lovers	174
31 Dirty Feet and a Broken Heart.....	179
32 Reconciliation.....	185
33 Restored and Reassured.....	190
34 The Value of Love	195
35 A Thousand Shekels for You	199

PREFACE TO ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes asks some very important questions. Why am I here on this earth? What will bring true satisfaction to life? These are questions we all need to ask. We live in a time when sin and evil surrounds us on every side. World news has become frightening. The book of Ecclesiastes speaks to this issue by introducing us to a God who is in control over the events of life. This God blesses His people with good things. He also holds us all accountable for our actions. For Solomon, the key to all of life was to learn what it means to fear God and walk in His ways. This alone would give meaning and purpose to a life that would otherwise be meaningless.

As you read this book, take the time to consider the things that Solomon is saying. Listen to what he says about the futility of life without God. Ask yourself if you are trying to find meaning in the things of this life apart from God. Take the time to see what Solomon has to say about fearing God.

Don't rush through this book. Take the time to reflect on its meaning and application to your life. Ask God to reveal its truths to you and show you how to apply them to your life. I trust that this book will serve as a tool to stimulate you to greater worship of God, who alone brings meaning to live.

I trust also that it will be a tool to stimulate prayer for those who are caught up in the meaningless pursuit of life without God.

May God bless as you take the time to study this important book of the Bible.

F. Wayne MacLeod

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

Author:

While there has been some debate among scholars over the authorship of Ecclesiastes, the first verse of the book is an indication that King Solomon, son of David, was likely the writer. This falls in line with evidence found in the book itself. The king described in the book was very wealthy. He was also given to reflection on life and its meaning. In comparing this book with what Solomon taught in Proverbs, we find many similarities. For our purposes in this commentary, we will assume that Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes.

Background:

The book of Ecclesiastes is about the search for meaning in life. King Solomon's quest is to find what gives life purpose. As a rich king, he sought fulfillment in pleasure, possessions, position and his profession as a king. All of these pursuits left him empty. He examined life in general and saw that there was a general sense of hopelessness in it. In the end, he concluded that a life without God was a life without meaning.

Importance of the Book for Today:

In our day men and women are still on a quest for the meaning and purpose of life. Solomon is not alone in his search. We don't have to look far to find people who are seeking to find happiness in the things they own or in the pleasures of this world. Many of these people find emptiness deep down in their hearts.

Ecclesiastes is a book that causes us to search for meaning. What is it that gives a sense of purpose in life? How do we find hope in the midst of the injustice and suffering that abounds around us? Solomon's conclusion still applies. If you want real purpose in life, you need to live with the understanding that there is a God who loves and cares for you, and to whom all people are accountable.

Solomon teaches us that to fear God is the only thing that will give meaning to life. To know there will be an accounting gives us hope in times of injustice. To know that He is sovereign gives us comfort in times of struggle. To know that He has a plan for our lives gives us courage to continue in the difficult times. Life without the fear of God is a life without meaning. Surely this is an important message even in our day.

1

MEANINGLESS

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

This book of Ecclesiastes is a reflection on life and its meaning. Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? What brings satisfaction and fullness to our existence? These are the questions the author addresses in this book. The author is introduced in the opening verse. He is a teacher, the son of David and king in Jerusalem. This can be none other than Solomon.

Solomon begins by offering his initial observation about life in general. This observation is quite shocking. Everything is meaningless, he says (verse 2). The word "meaningless" has the idea of emptiness and futility. Some translations use the word "vanity" to indicate that all that is done on earth is without purpose. Nothing has any real meaning and value.

It is important that we understand that Solomon is seeking an answer to the meaning of life. This is his starting point. As he looks at life from a purely human perspective, he fails to see purpose. He will develop his point throughout

the book and come to a final conclusion but this is not that conclusion. Notice what brings Solomon to make this initial statement about life in general?

Our Labor Is In Vain (verse 3)

What does man gain from all his labor, Solomon asks in verse 3. While it seems that Solomon is being very negative here; we need to understand where he is coming from. Have you ever asked yourself what the ultimate purpose of your job was? Are you a salesman? Do the things you sell really bring an answer to the deep heartfelt needs of humanity? What will become of the things you sell today in 50 years? Are you a repairman? What you repair today will break down again and need further repair. Are you a teacher? What we teach will ultimately disappear when those we teach die and take our teaching with them. We will have to teach the next generation all over again. This world has a tendency to destroy the work of our hands. Any housewife knows that there seems to be an endless cycle of repetitive work. We clean only to see things get messed up again. Doctors and counselors minister to the physical and emotional pain of a patient only to see them die in the end. There is a certain truth to what Solomon says here. In this sin-cursed earth everything is in a state of decline. All our efforts are only temporary solutions. We ask ourselves the same question as Solomon. What do we really accomplish with all our labours under the sun?

Futility of the Natural Order (verses 4-7)

From this statement about our labors under the sun, Solomon draws our attention to the natural order of life. "Generations come and generations go," he reminds us in verse 4. Our lives do not last forever. We live our lives, fill them with comfort and possessions and eventually die taking

nothing with us. The next generation does the same thing. They too perish with nothing. We come into this world with nothing and we leave with nothing. There is, according to Solomon, a futile cycle here. If we start with nothing and end with nothing what is the ultimate meaning to life?

The sun rises in the morning and sets at night. It moves in an endless repetitive cycle. It goes in circles, year after year, without variation or change (verse 4). It leaves the sky only to hurry back to the same place it began. The same thing happens to the wind. It leaves the north travels to the south and returns to where it began. It travels the whole earth only to end up where it started (verse 5). The streams and rivers of this earth travel down the slopes of the mountains and empty themselves into the sea. The sea, however, is never filled. The water that ends up in the sea is eventually evaporated into the air and returns to the slopes where it all came from originally. There is in nature, says Solomon an endless, repetitive cycle. Everything returns to where it started. If everything ends at the beginning, what has really been accomplished? According to Solomon there is certain meaninglessness to this endless cycle of nature?

The Futility of the Human Order of Life (verses 8-11)

Not only is there a meaninglessness in the natural order but this futility, according to Solomon, can also be seen in the human order of life. All things are wearisome, says Solomon (verse 8). We labor and toil only to end up weary and tired. We become weary of even the things we truly enjoy in life. A third of our life is spent in bed recovering from our emotional or physical weariness. The things we do to give meaning to life make us weary and tired. There is a certain futility in this.

Our eyes and ears continue to be filled with beautiful sounds and sights. These things delight our senses and fill us with joy. The problem, however, is that they pass quickly from us. Our eyes never seem to get their fill. Our ears never seem to stop wanting to hear. Our senses are never satisfied (verse 8). We are left always craving more.

There is nothing new under the sun. This was especially true in the days of Solomon. But there is even in our day a similar reality. Is there anything new under the sun today? We have been successful in manipulating nature to create new technology. In this sense, we are able to produce something "new" but even what we invent comes from what already exists. God has given us all we have. The supplies God has given us are being exhausted and there is nothing new to replace our exhausted supplies. What we have is all there is and all there every will be. With all our efforts and technology, nobody can add anything new to what we already have. According to Solomon, there was a certain futility to this.

Solomon reminds us in verse 11 that we live our lives contributing to the good of humanity only to die and see our memory fade. In years to come, nobody will remember our contribution. This too, says Solomon is meaningless and futile.

The Futility of Worldly Wisdom (verses 12-18)

Solomon sought to apply his heart to gain understanding and wisdom. He gave himself to study and reflection (verse 13). He became the wisest man on the earth. Where did all this pursuit of wisdom and understanding lead him? Solomon describes his pursuit as "meaningless." With all his wisdom, he still could not change the natural flow of life. He could not straighten those things

that were meant to be crooked. He could not count what was lacking (verse 15). Despite his wisdom, there were major gaps in his understanding. This only led him to frustration. He wearied himself in the pursuit of an answer that could not be found. In this pursuit of knowledge, he felt like he was chasing after the wind. He was trying to contain something that could not be contained. His growing knowledge and wisdom only caused him to ask more questions. This only led to sorrow and grief. What had he ultimately achieved by all his wisdom and knowledge if he could not change what God had designed? What was the purpose of all this knowledge if it only led to more questions and frustration?

Solomon was discovering that if we look only to this world for answers; we will quickly be disappointed. With all our technological and medical advances, we have still not answered the heartfelt needs of mankind. In a day of great technological advances, do we have a people who are more content and happy in life? With all his wisdom and knowledge, Solomon was discovering that there had to be a deeper meaning to life.

For Consideration:

- What has mankind ultimately achieved with all his technology and scientific advances? Has he really answered the heartfelt need of humanity?
- Where does meaning in life come for you? What is it that ultimately gives us satisfaction?

For Prayer:

- Do you know people who are frustrated by this world? Take a moment to pray that the Lord would reveal Himself to them.
- Have you been seeking satisfaction in this world system? Ask God to help you see that there is nothing in this world that will ultimately satisfy. Ask Him to point you to your real source of satisfaction and purpose in life.

2

THE FUTILITY OF PLEASURE

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Having seen futility in the natural and human order of life, Solomon seeks meaning and purpose in the pleasures of life. He discovers that even here there was certain meaninglessness. Let's consider what Solomon has to say about the pleasures of life.

Parties and celebrations (verse 2)

In his pursuit of purpose, Solomon gave himself to the pleasures of life. In verse 2, he reminds us that laughter was foolish and pleasure did not accomplish anything. Let's examine what Solomon is saying here.

Commentators tell us that the word for "laughter" is a word used to describe superficial fun. If this is the case, what Solomon is describing in the type of "fun" that is experienced at a party of some kind. We have all met people who live for this type of pleasure. They cannot wait until the weekend so that they can "party." All this "laughter" and superficial gaiety is foolishness, says Solomon. We don't

have to listen to the subjects of conversation at such gatherings to see just how superficial this laughter is. Do such gatherings solve the deep problems of man? Admittedly, for a moment, our problems are forgotten, but in the end, nothing is changed.

The second word used in this verse is the word translated "pleasure" (NIV). Commentators tell us that this word is a more serious word used to indicate a deeper type of pleasure than the word translated "laughter." This is the pleasure of someone who celebrates the good things of life in a more serious or dignified manner. This word, according to commentators, can be used to describe the celebration of religious or political holidays. In our day, it could be used to describe the celebration of Christmas, New Years, Easter, a child's birthday or a wedding anniversary. Again, we have all met individuals who live for these celebrations. Are they better people because of them? What do all their celebrations actually accomplish? These celebrations, according to Solomon, did not prove to be the answer to the problems of life.

Wine (verse 3)

Having been disappointed with his parties and celebrations, Solomon turned to wine. He is quick to tell us that, even though he experimented with wine, he was still directed by wisdom. In other words, he did not allow wine to control him. He understood that drunkenness was not the answer to life's problems but he knew the power of wine to cheer the heart. He drank in moderation.

He discovered, however, that wine did not solve life's problems. For a time his heart was cheered, but his problems never changed. Wine did not fill the emptiness of his heart.

Wine or strong drink did not provide the answer to the meaning of life.

Achievements (verses 4-6)

Solomon also tried to find meaning through personal achievements. He gave himself and his resources to the construction of great projects. He built homes (verse 4). He planted great public gardens and vineyards (verse 5). He opened up parks and planted numerous trees. He constructed reservoirs to water these massive parks and gardens. The people of his community revered him for his role in the betterment of their city. He had the pleasure of feeling that he was achieving something with his resources for the public good. People looked up to him as a benefactor. In the end, however, he asked himself the question: Will a public garden solve man's problem? Will a vineyard give meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence? A new home did not solve the problem of man's emptiness. More importantly, however, Solomon did not feel that all his efforts to achieve success in the public eye were the answer to his own pursuit of meaning and purpose in life. Despite his great achievements, his heart was still empty and dry. In this Solomon saw a certain futility.

Wealth (verses 7-8)

Solomon next gave himself to the pursuit of wealth and riches. He purchased slaves and servants. He amassed herds and flocks of sheep and cattle. He prided himself in having more than any other person. He had more silver and gold than he knew what to do with. He hired male and female singers to entertain and amuse him. He lacked nothing his heart desired. Despite his possessions, Solomon discovered that even the rich and wealthy could be empty. All these riches would perish with him. Money and

possessions were not the answer to his need. We have seen this to be true in our day as well. Some of the most lonely and empty people are those who seem to have everything. There are probably more problems with loneliness and suicide in developed countries than in underdeveloped countries. Wealth and riches bring problems of their own. Riches are not the solution to man's problems.

Sex (verse 8)

In verse 8, Solomon tells us that he acquired a harem. He surrounded himself with women. The Bible tells us that Solomon had one thousand wives. We can assume, as well, that these women were the most beautiful women in all the kingdom of Israel. Solomon indulged his sexual appetites. He had more lovers than any man could ever boast of having. If there ever was a man who could tell us if sex was the answer to man's deepest needs, it would be Solomon. For all his sexual activity, however, Solomon was left empty. He could not find what his soul searched for in sex. There was still something missing in his life.

Greatness (verse 9)

Solomon became a truly great man. Kings and queens of his day respected him. They came to him searching his wisdom. They came to see his wealth. Under his administration as king, Israel reached its height of power, wealth and influence. Even this greatness and respect did not give him the meaning he sought in life.

Solomon gives a concluding statement about the pursuit of pleasures in verses 10 and 11. "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired," he said. "I refused my heart no pleasure in life. I delighted in the work of my hands." He experienced all the pleasures in life anyone could have. When he

looked at what he had achieved, however, he was left with a sense that it was all meaningless. How could he have felt so empty, when he had so much and denied himself so little? While this may be hard to understand, we all know it to be true. You can have everything your heart desires in this world and still be empty. Ultimately, what Solomon discovered was that the pursuit of pleasure will only leave you empty in the end. He is truly empty whose only goal in life is the pursuit of pleasure.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between enjoying the good things God has given and seeking our meaning and purpose in them?
- Take a look at the pleasures spoken about here in Solomon's life. Are you still trying to find meaning and purpose in any of these things?
- Have you ever met someone who seemed to have everything and yet felt so empty?

For Prayer:

- Do you know someone who is caught up in the pursuit of pleasure? Ask the Lord to show them that there is something far more meaningful in life.
- Thank the Lord for the pleasures He gives us. Ask Him to help you find balance in enjoying the good things of life and seeking meaning and purpose in them.
- Thank God that only in Him is there true pleasure and purpose.

- Ask God to become so real to you that compared to knowing Him, the pursuit of this world's pleasures fades into insignificance.

3

THE FUTILITY OF WISDOM AND HER WORKS

Read Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

Solomon examined the question of worldly wisdom and knowledge in chapter 1. He described the pursuit of worldly wisdom and knowledge as being a burden and a chasing after the wind (see 1:13-14). In this next section, he speaks about wisdom and her works. Wisdom is ultimately much more than intellectual reflections and knowledge. Wisdom, by its very nature, is practical. Knowledge is content to accumulate facts and information. Wisdom applies these facts to everyday life.

As he compares wisdom and folly, Solomon recognizes the value of wisdom. Wisdom, he says, is better than foolishness (verse 13). The wise man walked in the light. He had eyes to see. The fool, however, was blind and could not see where he was going. Wisdom gave perception and insight. The fool lived for the moment. He repeated the same errors and did not learn from his mistakes. Wisdom sees obstacles on the path of life and is able to avoid them.

While wisdom was better than folly, where did all this wisdom lead in the end? When the wise man's time on earth was ended, what would happen to the fruit of his wisdom? In verse 12, Solomon asks: "Will my successor do anything that has not already been done?" Will he be able to build upon the fruit of my wisdom when I am gone? Will my son learn from my wisdom or will he fall into the same errors I fell into? Will he pick up where I left off and progress in wisdom? Can I pass all my accumulated wisdom to my offspring or will they have to start where I started? At the end of their lives, will they be any further ahead than I was?

As wise as he was, Solomon knew that, in the end, he would die and lie in the grave beside a fool. The destiny of the fool was the same as the destiny of the wise man. Both would perish and return to the ground. What advantage is there to being wise, if, in the end, I perish and lie in the grave beside a fool?

As he reflected on these things, Solomon was grieved in his heart. All his life's wisest achievements would ultimately be handed over to someone else. He could take nothing of what he had worked so hard to achieve with him to the grave. The wise man and his works would as easily be forgotten as the fool and his folly.

Solomon despaired when he thought about the fact that all his life's work and achievements would be handed over to a fool to do with as he pleased. Why should he pour his life into something only to give it to someone who cared nothing at all about his efforts? What did the fruit of all his wisdom accomplish in the end? Was it not futile to pour oneself into something that would only be thrown away by a fool?

Another aspect to this was the fact that, while he had very wisely and skillfully worked all his life to accomplish and accumulate many wonderful things, he would die and pass it on to someone else. His foolish successor would be the benefactor of years of accumulated wisdom he did not have to work for. Solomon saw in this a certain sense of injustice and vanity.

Those who have great responsibility find that they have no rest from their burden. They carry the weight of their responsibilities on their shoulders day and night. At day, they experience the grief and frustration of decisions. At night they agonize for many sleepless hours over the decisions they have made. While they live to better the lives of those around them, their own lives become more complicated. While they seek to ease the burden on the shoulders of their brothers and sisters, they increase the burden on themselves. The very thing they seek to alleviate in others, they accumulate in themselves. For Solomon, this was meaningless.

Solomon does see some good in these things, however. In life, says Solomon, there is nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work (verse 24). We should understand that Solomon is not telling us that we should live to eat, drink and work. To live for these things would prove meaningless. Solomon has been speaking about this in the last two chapters. What Solomon is saying, however, is that there is a certain satisfaction in life when we have a good job that provides us with food and drink. Solomon recognizes that this ability to enjoy the work we do is a gift from God. Those of us who have jobs we enjoy understand the gift this is.

This brings Solomon to a very important conclusion in verse 26. To the man that pleases Him, God gives wisdom,

knowledge and happiness. To the sinner, however, he gives the task of accumulating wealth to hand it over to someone else. We need to take a moment to examine what Solomon is saying here.

We see in this statement that there is something in life that brings pleasure and purpose. Finding satisfaction in eating, drinking and working is one of the great blessings of life. Notice, however, that Solomon wants his readers to understand that these things were gifts from God (see verse 24-25). True satisfaction in these things could only come when one realized that they came from God.

There is a world of difference between delighting in something for itself and delighting in something as a gift of God. When we see things as coming from a loving and eternal heavenly Father, we understand that we are loved. When we see the hand of God in our possessions and our work, we understand that they come from someone who cares deeply for us. That knowledge of a personal and loving Father brings meaning and purpose to our lives. We are not here to fend for ourselves and then die. We are the creation of a loving and personal God who reaches out to us in acts of mercy and kindness. I am loved and cared for. I am a creation of God. The creator of the universe notices me and is interested in my life.

Beyond this, however, Solomon recognized that those who pleased God received a special blessing from Him. Those who pleased God received wisdom, knowledge and happiness in life. As he examined people of all kinds, Solomon discovered that those who lived their lives recognizing God as the source of their blessing were generally happier people than those who lived for the things of this life alone. They seemed to get into less trouble in life and had more answers to the questions of life than those who

rejected God. On the other hand, those who lived for this world and did not take God into consideration lived a meaningless existence. They lived for the things of this world. They accumulated resources they could not take with them to the grave. In the end they would lose everything. The accumulation of wealth would not bring them happiness in life.

Solomon is telling us that life without God is meaningless. Those who recognize and love God are blessed with wisdom, knowledge and happiness. The one who lives for his work and his wealth lives a life of futility. He will perish and not take anything with him. His achievements and possessions will not answer the deep questions of his soul. Those who recognize God as the source of their blessings and seek after Him are able to enjoy life and find they have greater purpose.

For Consideration:

- What difference is there between enjoying something for itself and enjoying something as a gift of God?
- How does the recognition of God bring meaning to life?
- Compare the believer with the unbeliever who lives for the things of this world. What is the difference between them in terms of wisdom, knowledge and happiness?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to consider the blessings of God in your life. Thank God for these blessings.
- Do you have a job that you enjoy? Thank God for this blessing.
- Do you find your work difficult and trying? Ask God to help you to find satisfaction in it? Ask Him to help you to see His purpose for you in it.

4

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

In this next section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reflects on the order of life. There is a time for everything that happens.

It is hard to understand what Solomon is trying to say about this order in life. Does he see this order as positive or negative? Does he feel trapped in this ordered system of life? In chapter 1, Solomon reflects on the endless cycles of nature. The sun seems to go round in circles. The wind blows from one end of the earth to the other and returns to its point of origin. The rivers and streams flow down to the seas and return back to the mountains to repeat their journey all over again. Nothing seems to deviate from the ordered plan of life.

Not only can we see this endless cycle in life but there is also a time for everything that happens. There is a time to be born and a time to die. Who can decide on the time of his birth or death? Death comes in the time of the Lord whether we are ready for it or not. It is completely out of

our hands. A good man may die in the prime of life while an evil man may die after a long and healthy life. There is a time for birth and a time for death and we have nothing to say in the matter.

There is also, in life, a time to plant and a time to uproot. We cannot plant at our convenience. If we want to harvest a crop, we must respect the seasons. The same is true for the harvest. If we do not harvest at the appropriate time, the crop will be spoiled. Here again we are bound to this cycles of nature. We are not in control of these matters.

Verse 3 reminds us that there is also a time to kill and a time to heal. It is quite easy for us to understand what the author means here by "a time to heal." Any doctor will tell you, however, that in this matter of healing, we are not in control. There is a time when people will be healed and a time when they won't. Despite our great medical advances, none of us can guarantee healing if it is not God's purpose. Healing must take place in its own time and according to the purpose of God.

There is also a time to kill. As human beings we are under the rule and authority of a sovereign God. His law taught that anyone who took a man's life was to be punished by death (Genesis 9:6). There was a time when God's judgment was to be exercised. Solomon, as king, knew that while he had the power to kill, to exercise that power whenever he wanted, however, would bring the judgment of God on him.

Recently, my wife and I began to do some calculations on how much it was costing us to keep our car on the road. We discovered that it was costing us more to repair the car than it would cost to buy a new one. At times, it is more cost effective to tear down a building than it is to repair it.

We know that this world is in a constant state of decay. Nothing lasts forever. Houses or buildings will only last so long and then they will have to be torn down and something else put in its place. Here again, we have no control over this matter.

Can you control the time you laugh or the time you weep? Can you say to sorrow: "It's not convenient for me right now to weep, come back another day?" Can you control when laughter or sorrow strikes? The reality is that when life strikes a cruel blow, we grieve whether it is convenient or not. We may be in the midst of intense laughter when grief strikes its blow. We can't tell it to come back later because we're laughing right now. There is a time to laugh and a time to mourn or weep. We have no ultimate control over either.

Verse 5 reminds us that there is also a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. When is it appropriate to scatter stones? Some see a reference to the construction of a building. Maybe the stones were scattered to fill up a hole in the earth? Maybe they were dumped into a river to build a dam. There are many reasons why stones would be scattered. There is an equal number of reasons why stones would be gathered. To scatter when we should gather would only cause problems. If we are going to get anywhere in life we need to learn the art of scattering or gathering at the appropriate time.

There is also a time to embrace and a time when embracing is not appropriate. Joseph understood this principle when Potiphar's wife wanted to sleep with him. This "embracing" does not only refer to relationships. Those in ministry know that there are times to embrace a particular ministry and other times we need to refuse ministry. The apostles, for example, refused to embrace the ministry of

serving tables, choosing rather the ministry of the Word and prayer (see Acts 6:2). If we do not respect this time to embrace or refrain from embracing, we can very easily become sidetracked. What we need to understand in this is that while there are times when we would like to embrace something, we will have to resist the urge because it is not appropriate or the timing is wrong. We cannot do as we please.

Some time ago I was following a news report about a big earthquake that leveled a number of buildings in a large city. Rescue workers were searching through the rubble for survivors. They knew, however, that after a certain number of days, hope of finding anyone alive was extremely small. Eventually they would have to give up searching. There is a time to search and a time to give up searching. The families of those buried under the rubble understood that the time to search was limited. Soon, the time to stop searching would come. They could not control this time. They just had to make the most of it.

There is a time to keep and there is also a time to throw away. Sometimes this comes about as a result of changing circumstances. Life is in a constant state of change. Businesses today realize that if they want to compete in this modern society, they will need to throw away outdated methods and adopt new methods. There is a time to keep but there is also a time to throw away. There have been times when I have had clothes that were so old and worn that the only thing they were good for was to be torn up and used as rags. Everything has its time.

Just as there is a time to build up and a time to tear down, so there is a time to tear and a time to mend. This may be even true in relationships. There are times when it is preferable to separate and go our different ways rather than

continue to destroy each other by bitterness and anger. Consider, for example, the case of Paul and Barnabas when they could not agree on what to do with John Mark. The conflict was such between them that they simply had to go their separate ways (see Acts 15:37-39). I have seen conflicts in churches that were so intense that the only solution seemed for some of the people involved in the conflict to separate. There is a time to separate. There is also a time to mend. Try as we may, we cannot mend those things that were meant to be torn. Understand as well, that even in the process of mending, we need to respect the timing of God. While there are some relationships that we would like to mend right now, they can only be mended in the right time.

Have you ever been in a situation where you said something you should not have said? How many times do we speak out when we should be quiet? How many times do we remain silent when we should speak out? There is a time to speak and there is a time to be quiet. Sometimes we are bursting to say something but know that if we do, it would only cause problems. At other times, to speak out is probably the last thing in the world we want to do, but we know it is necessary. Again we must respect time.

There are also times in life when we need to love and times we need to hate. There are things we love that in reality, we need to hate. There are people we hate that we need to love. Lives all across our nations are being destroyed because we do not respect this rule: Love when we need to love and hate when we need to hate. We need to love what God loves and hate what God hates. Often this does not correspond with what we want or what we feel inside.

There is also a time to go to war. We must battle those things that are contrary to the purposes and will of God.

There are also times when all we can do is surrender to the purposes of God and make our peace.

In all this, Solomon seems to be telling us that we are ultimately not in control of our lives or the events of our lives. There is a power that is beyond us. There is a time for everything. If we want to live our lives to the full, we must learn to respect that time.

For Consideration:

- How much control do we really have in life? Is there anything we can control?
- Are there areas of your life where you do not respect God's timing? What are they? What is the result of not doing things in God's time?
- Why is it so hard for us to respect God's time?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to respect His time and His ways.
- Ask Him to forgive you for the times you rushed out ahead of Him to do things in your own way.
- Surrender yourself afresh to God to do as He pleases in His time.

5

REVERE GOD

Read Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Solomon has been seeing so much futility in life. In the last meditation, he shared with us that we are not in control of the events of our lives. So far, Solomon's reflections lead us to wonder about the purpose of life. Every so often Solomon interjects a message of hope in his reflection. We have one of those messages in this passage.

Solomon begins by asking the question: What does a worker gain from all his toil? Solomon realized that life was difficult. We are required to work hard just to survive. We are not in control of the events and circumstances of our lives. As he looks at the effort and trials of life, Solomon reminds us of the burden God has placed on men and women. Life is filled with stress and toil. Who among us has been able to live his or her life without experiencing hurt and pain?

Solomon reminds us that there is hope. In verse 11, he reassures us that God makes everything beautiful in His time. What an incredible statement this is. Yes, life has

often been cruel. Yes, the burden has sometimes led us to despair. The words of Solomon, however, are encouraging. God will make all things beautiful. There is a sovereign God in control of the events of life. There is nothing out of His control. Everything is in His hands. He makes all things beautiful. What is your struggle? What cruel blow has life dealt you? What stress and turmoil are you experiencing? The promise of God's Word is that He will make it beautiful. Right now you may not see this beauty. Those of us who are old enough to look back in time have seen the hand of the Lord take the most tragic circumstances of life and change them to good. The apostle Paul reminds us of this truth in his epistle to the Romans:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28, NIV)

There is hope in this dark world. As long as God exists there is light. God is bigger than life. He is bigger than your pain and toil. Lift up your eyes. Be encouraged by this reality. There is no cause for despair. God will bring beauty into the darkness you are experiencing. He will do this in His time. We would like Him to do it in our time. We are a very impatient people. God will not be rushed. We must learn to wait for his time.

Solomon reminds us of something else in verse 11. He tells us that God has set eternity in the hearts of man. There are at least two things we need to consider here.

Firstly, we were created as eternal beings. God has placed eternity in our hearts. We are creatures who will live on through eternity. Every person has a soul that will never perish. The encouragement we take from this is that there is something beyond this life. There is hope that one day,

when our physical body has perished; we will be set free from these burdens and trials. We would have every reason to despair if our life consisted of living with all the trials and tribulations and then dying with nothing more to live for. If there was nothing more to life than what we have here below, what hope would we have? Solomon reminds us, however, that there is hope. God has created us as eternal beings. There is more to life than what we are experiencing right here and now.

Having eternity in our hearts, however, is much more than this. We were also created with the capacity to commune with an eternal God. We will never find meaning and purpose in life apart from this reality. Without God our lives will be empty and meaningless. There will always be something missing.

What does this mean in the context of this passage? Solomon has been reminding us of the cruelty and burden of life. Our hope lies in the fact that God has created us with the capacity to fellowship with Him. Unlike animals, we are spiritual creatures. It is the desire of God to enter a relationship with us so He created us with this capacity. A quick look at David's life will show us how important this principle was for him. What did David do when things started to crumble around him? Where did he go to make sense of his confusing and dark world? Over and over again, David reached out to the Eternal One. Time after time, he found comfort in calling out to God. Where would we go if God had not created within us this capacity to enjoy Him and fellowship with Him? There are times when God is all we have. There are times when nobody else understands. In light of the darkness and cruelty of life, there is a ray of hope. God has created us with eternity in our hearts. There is someone we can go to in these times. God has created us with the capacity to find strength, enabling

and comfort in Him as an eternal God. What a blessing and encouragement this is to us today.

Having said this, Solomon now tells us how we need to respond to the burden of life. Firstly, he tells us that we need to learn to be happy (verse 12). We can only be happy when we understand the truth Solomon has just told us. God will make everything beautiful in His time and He has put eternity into our hearts. When life deals you a cruel blow, be reminded of these truths. May the reality of these truths bring happiness and joy to your heart. Understanding that God is in control and that He will make things beautiful should make us happy. What do we have to fear? Why should we worry? God is in control. In this we can rejoice.

Secondly, Solomon reminds us that we need to do good (verse 12). How many times have we, in light of the burden of life, responded with bitterness and anger towards those who hurt us? When struck we have a tendency to strike back. Whatever people may say or do to us, we know that God is greater. He will work out all things for our good (Romans 8:28). When we understand this, we are able to bless those who curse us. We are able to pray for those who abuse us. We seek their blessing because we know that no matter what they do, God can use it to draw us closer to Himself.

There is another thing that God gives us in this life of struggle and turmoil. He gives us the gift of satisfaction and contentment (see verse 13). Many times, however, we resist this gift. By our bitterness and anger we reject His gift of satisfaction. Our bitterness and anger only lead to greater despair. God is willing today to give you satisfaction and contentment. When we learn to be content and satisfied with what God has given, a tremendous burden is lifted.

Satisfaction enables us to rest in what God is doing. There is blessing in satisfaction and contentment. Don't go through life bitter and angry when God wants to fill you with satisfaction and contentment with what you have.

In a world where everything will pass away, is it not wonderful to know that what God does will endure forever (verse 14). In a world that is in a constant state of change, is it not good to know that in God there is consistency? God will never change. We cannot add to God's plan and purpose nor can we take away from it. He is in control. No matter what man does, it will not take away from God's great overall purpose for His people. He is greater than anyone or anything that can come against us. His purposes will not be foiled.

In light of these truths, we will conclude this meditation with what Solomon tells us in verses 14 and 15. He reminds us in verse 14, that God allows all these things to happen in life so that we will revere Him. What does it mean to revere God? To revere is to respect and honour. The trials in life have as their purpose to draw us closer to God. These trials cause us to depend on Him and surrender to Him. It is the delight of God to communicate with us. Were it not for these trials we would not hear God nor would we understand His grace and compassion.

In verse 15, Solomon reminds us that we will have to give an account of our lives before God. God asks that we revere and live for Him. He has given us trials but promises that as we wait on Him, He will use them to make all things beautiful. He has put eternity in our hearts. He has given us the ability to enjoy Him even in the trials of this life. He offers us rest from our struggle by giving us the gift of satisfaction and contentment. Remember, however, that He calls us to account for our lives. Will we allow Him to create

this beauty in us? Will we surrender to Him and what He wants to do? Only then can we find any true meaning in life.

For Consideration:

- What comfort do you take from the fact that the Lord does make all things beautiful in His time? Have you seen God making something beautiful out of your struggles? Explain.
- How has your relationship with God helped you to face the harsh realities of this life?
- Have you received the gift of satisfaction and contentment that Solomon speaks about in this passage?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you grace to accept His purpose for your life. Thank Him for the trials He has used to draw you closer to himself.
- Thank the Lord that He is in absolute control of life.
- Thank Him for the hope of eternity that He has put in your heart.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for how He has made a particular trial beautiful in your life.

6

JUSTICE

Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

Solomon has been telling us that there is a cycle in life that cannot be interrupted. There is a time for everything under the sun. Nothing can be forced. God has designed everything to work in balance. To deviate from this plan is to create problems. Solomon seems to be somewhat frustrated by this cycle and design. Although he is, at this point in history, the wisest, most powerful and richest man on the earth, he realizes that he is not in control of his destiny. There is a power much greater than his. He is humbled by his own frailty and powerlessness.

There is something else that concerns Solomon as he reflects on the realities of life. In the place where justice was supposed to be carried out, he saw terrible injustice and wickedness. Has anything really changed in our day?

This wickedness in high places only seemed to magnify the futility of life. Life is hard enough as it is. Life has a way of dealing some very hard blows. Part of the struggle in life has to do with sin in the human heart. Theft, murder, and

immorality are everywhere. If you have ever experienced the theft of something you held dear, you can identify with the sense of injustice that Solomon is struggling with here. What happens, however, when you take your case to the court and find that the legal system is filled with wickedness? You are denied the justice you seek. What are we to think when the people who lead us are wicked people? There are times when there is as much crime and wickedness in the places of justice as there is on the streets of our land. Those we go to for justice are guilty of the crimes we seek to punish.

This reflection seemed to grieve Solomon greatly. How can a just man find justice? How can righteousness prevail when those who supposedly promote righteousness are themselves guilty of injustice and wickedness? There is a terrible hypocrisy in this. The reality of this wickedness in high places could lead a righteous man to despair.

There was a consolation in this, however. Solomon realized that God was still on the throne. His reflections on life led him to understand that we are all held accountable to God and His purposes. Yes, there was terrible injustice in the land. Yes, there was wickedness in high places but God was still in control. The day was coming when He would judge. He would judge both the righteous and the wicked. No one would escape this judgment. Each of us will have to give an account of our actions. In light of the tremendous wickedness and injustice in our world today, is it not good to know that there is one person we can go to who will not be corrupted? There is hope because God will call us all to account.

Notice in verse 17 that this accounting will happen in God's time. Right now you might not see justice in what is happening around you. Right now it may seem that

wickedness is ruling in the land. Solomon reminds us that for everything there is a time. God will bring justice in His time. God is sovereign in this matter. We cannot rush him. He will reveal Himself when He is ready. Be assured, however, that He will reveal His holy presence.

The question may be asked: Why does God allow this injustice at all? Why does He not intervene immediately? Solomon reminds us that there is a very specific reason why God allows the injustice to continue for a time. In verse 18, he tells us that God tests us so that we can see that we are like animals. What does Solomon mean by this?

The terrible injustice that happens in this world shows us that we are no better than animals. Is our morality any better than the morality of the animal kingdom? Adultery, pornography, homosexuality and rape show us that we fall short of even the standards found in the animal world. Do we care for our own better than animals? Abortions, suicide, murder and our history of wars and mass killings show us that we again fall short of the standards adhered to by the animal kingdom. Do we care for our environment more than animals? Our history of depleting the resources of this earth simply to enrich our own pockets shows us again that we have failed to come up to the standard of the animal world. Are we conscious of our spiritual nature? Do we understand that God has placed eternity in our hearts as human beings? Here again, for the most part, we have failed to appreciate what God has given us in creating us in his image. We choose to live like animals, content with only what this life gives us. For the most part, we are not interested in spiritual matters. Why are we experiencing so much injustice? Is it not because we behave worse than animals? What does all of this tell us? Does it not reveal who we really are? Does it not humble us to understand that we will one day be judged? Our record in this world

should show us how much we need a Savior. God has chosen to allow the injustice to be revealed so that we can understand our need for Him.

There is something else that we need to understand here. Both man and animal were created from the dust and will one day return to the dust. The same fate awaits both. In verse 21, Solomon asks: Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth? From the perspective of someone who does not understand God's eternal plan, this question causes a real problem. How many people have we met who are asking this same question today? Is there a life after death? Is there a heaven and a hell? If you do not have an answer to this question how can there be any purpose to our life? Solomon lived his life to the fullest and found there was a void in his life that left him empty and barren. What would be the purpose of living if all life had to offer in the end was emptiness and death. Comfort and purpose in life only comes through the assurance we have that God has created eternity in our hearts and that we can know this reality of eternal life after this world.

In light of these truths, what is Solomon's conclusion? He challenges us to enjoy our work in life. We are to rejoice in the good things God has given us because we don't know what will happen after we die (verse 22). In other words, be happy with what God has given you today. Don't overly concern yourself with what will happen when you are gone. In other words, we need to live each moment to the fullest. We are to learn how to make the most out of what God has given us. God has given us each a lot in life. We can complain about that lot. We can reject it and seek other things in life. Solomon tells us that the best place to be is where God has put us. Those who learn to be content with what

God has given enjoy life and have greater purpose than those who are always seeking something 'better.'

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of the injustice Solomon speaks about in your society?
- Can you recall a time when the pain and injustice of this life drew you closer to the Lord? Explain.
- What comfort do you take from the fact that God is sovereign and will call us all to account?
- What is the benefit of learning to be content with what God has given us? Are you content with the purpose of God for your life right now?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is in control of the events of this life and will one day call us to account.
- Thank the Lord that He can use the injustice and pain of our lives to draw us closer to Himself.
- Ask God to forgive us for the way we have lived our lives like animals. Ask Him to forgive our society for the way we have disregarded His laws and allowed injustice to reign.
- Ask God to teach you to be content with the good things He has given.

OPPRESSION AND GREED

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

Solomon takes a moment now to reflect on the oppression and greed he saw around him. The pursuit of this world's possessions and riches has been the source of unending problems in society. From the days of Cain and Abel, jealousy and envy have divided brothers and sisters. Paul tells us, in 1 Timothy 6:10, that the love of money has been the source of all kinds of evil. Solomon saw this in his own day as well.

As Solomon looked around him, he was grieved by the oppression he saw. He saw the tears of the oppressed. He also saw that there was no one to comfort them in their grief. It seemed that they were being held at the mercy of the powerful. How many conflicts have begun because of a desire for more power and wealth?

This lust for power and wealth had caused so much oppression that Solomon was led to the conclusion, in verse 2, that it was better to be dead than alive. At least in death we are free from oppression. In the grave a man

experienced rest from trouble and turmoil. Solomon is not thinking here about life after death. He is simply saying that the human body, when lying in the grave, experiences no pain, hunger or thirst.

According to Solomon in verse 3, the person who was better off still was the one who had never been born. The dead would have had to experience much trial and turmoil in life. The person who was never born would never have experienced this oppression.

Added to all this overwhelming oppression in life was the unending cycle to be better than one's neighbor (verse 4). Solomon's society seemed to be motivated by envy and jealousy. Solomon observed that often what motivated a man was envy of his neighbor. He could not endure to see his neighbor being more successful than him. He needed to have as much or more than the man next door. His business had to be as successful as his competitors. There seemed to be a mad scramble to get to the top. Nobody wanted to be last. Contentment with one's position or possessions was rare.

How much of what we do today is motivated by envy. From our youth up we have been saturated by this philosophy. We need to get the best marks at school. We need to wear clothes that are as good as our fellow students at school. We need to be as popular as everyone else. We measure success by comparing ourselves to others in our lives.

As Solomon looked at the motivation behind the efforts of our hands, he was grieved. Was there not a higher motive than envy and jealousy? What did it say about his society when the greatest motivation behind our achievements was to be better than someone else?

On the other end of the scale were those who had simply folded their hands and given up. This only led to ruin. What was the answer to this dilemma? Envy had led to oppression and dissatisfaction. Folding the hands led only to ruin. For Solomon, the balance could be found in contentment. It is better, he says, to only have one handful and live in peace than to have two handfuls and be constantly chasing after the wind (verse 6). In other words, there is more joy in life when we are content with the little we do have than to be constantly pursuing what we do not have.

He illustrates this in the next few verses. He tells us about a man he met who worked hard and accumulated much wealth. He did not have a family to provide for but he continued to accumulate possessions. One day he asked himself the question: Why am I working so hard? Why am I depriving myself of life's joys? What has all my long hours achieved in my life? For whom am I doing all this? Here, says Solomon, was a man who could have enjoyed life. Instead, he found himself caught up in this endless pursuit of more possessions and wealth. In the end, he was left weary and tired wondering whether less wealth and more time to enjoy life would have been better. How many parents have watched their children head out the door and asked themselves whether they would not have been better to have spent less time trying to keep up with their neighbor and more time with their children?

It is better to be happy with just a little than to be discontent with much. Riches do not guarantee contentment. Many lives have been ruined by the love of possessions. Solomon challenges us to learn to be content with the things the Lord has given us.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to examine what you have in life. How much of what you have achieved or accomplished is the result of envy and wanting to keep up with others?
- How much oppression in your society has its source in the love of power and possessions?
- Are you content with the things God has given you?
- Has the pursuit of this world caused you to give up other priorities in your life? What are they?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you to be content with the things He has given.
- Ask Him to show you what priorities He wants you to have in life.
- Ask God to set you free from the pursuit of this world and its possessions.
- Thank God for the blessings you do have from Him. Take a moment to thank Him particularly for some of those blessings.

8

THE BLESSING AND FRAGILITY OF COMPANIONSHIP

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-16

As we continue our reflection on life and its meaning, Solomon draws our attention to the blessing of companionship. He begins by reminding us that two are better than one. What he wants to say is that there is a real blessing in having a companion in life. Solomon explains what he means in the next few verses.

They have a good return on their work (verse 9)

“Two are better than one,” says Solomon, “because two have a better return on their work.” Two people working together can accomplish more than one person working alone. In fact, there are some jobs which cannot be done by one person alone. Realize, however, that not only can more be accomplished by two people working as a team, but there is also more wisdom in two people than in one.

Often one person remembers something that the other person has forgotten. One person may clearly see something that has been overlooked by someone else. Two people working as a team will more likely get a better return for their efforts. We need to understand this principle in the context of the church. God has created the body in such a way that we work best as a team.

They can help each other (verse 10)

Not only is more accomplished by working as a team, but when one person falls, the other can help him up. Living in this world, we can be sure that there will be times when something will happen to us to make us fall. How many times have we had to call on a co-worker to help us out when we just could not accomplish what was required. Sickness or an accident can quickly happen. In times like this, it is wonderful to have someone to call on who can fill in for us. While this is true in the area of sickness and accident, it is also true in the area of discouragement and trials. How many times have the trials and tribulations of life dragged us down so that we became discouraged? In times like these, isn't it wonderful to have someone to encourage us and pick us up emotionally. Sometimes it is a word of encouragement or an act of kindness; sometimes it is a gentle reminder that we are still loved. Whatever the need at the moment, having a partner to stand with us in these times of need is indeed a real blessing in life.

They can keep each other warm (verse 11)

"Two people can keep each other warm", says Solomon. He may be thinking about the cold winter nights in Israel with no heating in the homes. Having someone to sleep with helps to keep each other warm. There is something more than this here, however. What we need to realize is

that we all tend to grow cold in our relationships and commitments unless the fire of our passion is stirred up from time to time. In your relationship with the Lord, for example, where would you be if it were not for the encouragement of your Christian friends? How many times would your service for the Lord grow cold if it were not for the gentle reminders of a close partner to persevere? We need each other to keep the fires of commitment burning. Those in whom passion burns brightest are those who are surrounded by people who bless and encourage them in this passion. We stir each other up.

They Can Defend Each Other (verse 12)

One person can be easily overpowered, but it is more difficult to overpower two people. We understand this from a practical point of view, but this is also true from a spiritual point of view. I remember praying with a man who was struggling with a particular sin in his life. He was sharing with us that he often fell into this sin. He challenged us to "check up" on him from time to time and pray with him about this problem. He understood that even in the spiritual world, two are better than one. What he was asking us to do was to stand with him against the enemy. Knowing that the day was coming when one of us would ask him how he was doing strengthened him in his resolve to resist the attacks of the enemy. The enemy was also thwarted by the prayers of his friends for him in this area of weakness.

How we need to understand what Solomon is saying here. A cord of three strands is not as easily broken as a cord of one strand. Many try to find a significance in the number three here. This is not necessary. Solomon is simply telling us that there is strength in numbers. Even spiritually speaking, there is strength in numbers. If you want to

overcome a particular sin, don't try to do it on your own. Surround yourself with the encouragement and prayers of the larger body. You will see that the enemy must retreat as the body joins together in oneness of mind to stand with us against him.

In verses 13-16, Solomon speaks about a foolish old king and a poor wise youth. Imagine an old king who had accumulated much wealth and many possessions over his lifetime. He had, however, grown old and foolish. While he may have had many faithful advisers in life, he began to shut them out. He refused to take their warnings seriously (verse 13). Maybe he had become confident in himself and his experience. He was powerful and could do whatever he wanted. That is just what he did. He no longer consulted his friends or advisers. He shut them out of his life and foolishly did whatever he wanted.

Imagine now a young man who has had nothing in life. He was born in poverty and ended up in jail because of a foolish crime he had committed (verse 14). Although he was poor and had been in prison, verse 13 describes him as being wise. Maybe his time in prison had taught him a lesson. This youth rose to power and eventually became king in the place of the old foolish king. People gave their allegiance to him. He became very popular as a king with many servants (verse 16). In time, however, there were people who were not pleased with him either (verse 16).

As Solomon examined these two kings, he saw how quickly people turned from one leader to another. Their allegiance was very fragile and could easily be broken. In an instant, they would turn even from the young king to another, when it suited them better.

Solomon reminds us of the frailty of relationships. "I have seen no end to those who come before them but those who come after them are not pleased," says Solomon in verse 16. What does he mean by this? The picture is one of the crowds gathering behind their new and wise leader. They rejoice and celebrate his coming to power. In just a short while, however, their celebration turns to grumbling and complaining. Soon they find things they do not agree with and lose interest in their new leader. Eventually they abandon him like the old foolish king and seek another leader. How many times have we seen this in the governments of our day? How many times do we see this when a new pastor comes to the church? How many friendships begin and quickly fade away?

Could it be that part of the problem is that the enemy knows the importance of relationships in the body of Christ? Could it be that he seeks to destroy relationships because he knows that there is strength and power in them? We need to guard these relationships with all our might. We cannot let the enemy divide us. May God teach us to be the companions we need to be for each other in light of the tremendous battle that rages around us for our souls.

For Consideration

- Consider who your closest friends and companions are. What strength do you find in them? What difference have they made in your life?
- Are there individuals you need to stand with in their trials?

- Do you need to find someone else to stand with you in a particular struggle or sin in your life?

For Prayer

- Thank God that He has designed the body in such a way that we need each other.
- Ask God to help you to be a better companion to your friends and loved ones. Ask Him to make you more sensitive to their needs.
- Ask God to protect your relationships from the attacks of the enemy.

9

THE SINS OF THE MOUTH

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

One of the most difficult things to control is the use of our tongues. James tells us that the tongue is like a fire that can destroy a whole forest (see James 3:5). Solomon speaks to us here about the tongue.

He begins by challenging us to guard our steps when we go to the house of God. There is a note of caution here. We are challenged to go to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools. What is Solomon telling us here and what is its application for us today?

There are those who go to the house of God to worship who do not live for Him. These individuals, for the most part, believe that everything is right between them and their Lord. They do not know that they are sinners before a holy God. They sing the great hymns of the faith which speak about dedication and consecration of our lives to God but they know nothing about this kind of life. They praise God for a salvation they have not experienced. They give their offerings to a cause they do not truly

believe in. Their sacrifices are, according to Solomon, the sacrifices of fools (verse 1). Only a fool would sacrifice to a cause he really did not believe in.

These individuals make great promises to God that they are not able to follow through on. Today they sing "I Surrender All" but have no intention of surrendering all. They sing "Take My Life" but have no intention of actually giving their lives to Him. These individuals are called to go to the house of God to listen rather than to offer their sacrifices. The one who goes to listen is open to hear from God. He is willing to let God reveal his true nature.

We are challenged, secondly, not to be quick to utter anything before God (verse 2). How quick we are to sing hymns and pray wonderful prayers. We dare not take lightly what we say in the house of God (or anywhere else for that matter). "Remember," says Solomon, "God is in heaven and you are on earth so let your words be few." We are mere human beings speaking to a holy God who knows all things. Can we come into the presence of an awesome and holy God with insincere hearts? We cannot hide the reality of our true nature and intentions. Better to say little but mean it, than to make great promises and sin before a holy God.

Those who understand what it means to be under stress in the workplace know that we often take that stress and concern with us to bed. The more stress and concern we carry with us during the day, the more likely we are to dream about these things at night. In the same way, the more we speak, the more likely it is that foolishness will come out of our mouths (verse 3). Better to be a person of few words than to risk saying things we will regret for life.

What we have been saying is particularly true in the area of vows and promises we make both before God and to others. God takes these vows and promises seriously. He calls us to be people of honesty and integrity. According to Solomon, only a fool would make a vow to God and not keep it (verse 4). Remember that God is a holy and all powerful God. Nobody who understands who God is would take lightly a promise made to Him. Do not delay in fulfilling your vow to God. When you offered your life to him, God took you seriously and He requires that you be true to your word. To refuse to be true to your promise to God is a serious matter. It is far better, says Solomon, never to make a vow to the Lord, than to make a vow and not keep it (verse 5).

In our age of increasing divorce and marital unfaithfulness, many have been guilty of breaking their marriage vows before God. Others have made vows of faithfulness to God at their baptism but they have wandered far from those vows today. Like Solomon says, they come to the temple and say "my vow was a mistake" (verse 6). I should never have made it. They think that because they made a mistake they are no longer accountable to their commitment. Why should God look favorably on anyone who mocks Him by carelessly promising this and that but not keeping their words? By such a careless attitude towards God, do we not stir up His anger against us?

How seriously do we take what we say to God? He is very clearly a forgiving God but He is also a holy God. Listen to what Jesus tells us in the book of Matthew:

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. (Matthew 12:36, NIV)

One day we will stand before God and give an account of the things we have said. We will not only have to give an account for those words we really meant, but also for those "careless" words spoken without thought.

"Don't let your mouth lead you to sin," Solomon says in verse 6. How easy it is for us to fall into this trap. I have often sung hymns when my mind was elsewhere. Do I really mean what I am singing? I have given things over to the Lord only to take them back. How we need to understand that we stand before an awesome and holy God who hears every word we speak. We dare not take what we say in His presence lightly.

Verse 7 challenges us to stand in awe of God. Too many words will inevitably lead us to sin. He who stands in awe of God understands who God is and watches carefully the words he speaks in His presence.

As Solomon examines the purpose of life, he notices that much time is spent speaking. We often say things we do not mean. We make commitments we never intend to keep. We sing hymns about a life we are not living. We offer sacrifices of thanksgiving when our hearts are not thankful. Many of our words are meaningless.

The challenge of this passage is to see the preciousness of words. Many words are wasted in meaningless conversations and unkept promises. The words we speak have the power to heal and encourage. They can instruct and bless. They can give life and hope when we are about to give up. They can also be wasted on meaningless talk. May God teach us to weigh our words so our mouths do not lead us to sin.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever made a promise to the Lord and not kept it? What do you need to do about it?
- Have you ever been guilty before God of the misuse of your words? How?
- What challenge do you find in this passage for you personally?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to be more careful in the use of your words.
- Ask Him to help you to be faithful to the vows and promises you make.
- Thank God that He has been very patient with you in those times when you have failed in the use of your words.

10

MATERIALISM AND INJUSTICE

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

Solomon moves on in this next section to speak about the question of materialism and injustice. Remember that Israel was prosperous under the reign of Solomon. Kings and queens of other nations lifted up envious eyes toward Israel and its wealth. This wealth brought many problems. Let's take a look at some of the issues Solomon observed in his day.

Oppression of the poor (verse 8)

"Don't be surprised when you see the poor oppressed and justice denied them," Solomon tells his readers in verse 8. This practice was so common that it did not surprise Solomon anymore. Where there is money and wealth, the poor are oppressed. Solomon tells us that the reason this happened was because one official was over another and over them both was someone even higher. Solomon seems to be pointing out the natural tendency of man to climb over

others to get to the top. In man's pursuit of wealth and influence, he willingly tramples over others. One official uses his influence and wealth to get ahead of another. Someone over him does the same. The rich become richer at the expense of the poor because those with the power sought more and more.

What the poor man earns from his land is claimed by others. The king, who already has all he needs, claims his part of the proceeds from the land of the poor. Taxes and excessive interest are taken from the land to increase the wealth of those who already have more than they need. The fields of the poor are divided among the rich. The poor man works these fields only to give to the rich who sits back and enjoys the profit. Where is the justice in this? Notice that as king of Israel, Solomon saw himself as part of the problem.

"The thing about money and possessions," says Solomon in verse 10, "is that the more you have the more unsatisfied you are." The more you accumulate, the more you want. Whoever loves money will never have enough. The spirit of materialism thrives on greed and dissatisfaction. Like strong drink, materialism intoxicates and leaves people craving more. "This," says Solomon "is meaningless." A man spends his life seeking money and possessions but when he gets them he is still not satisfied. There can be no ultimate meaning in money and material possessions. Like chasing after the wind, those obsessed by material things pursue something they can never really possess.

The more we have the more we use. As our goods increase so does our appetite. We have more food so we eat more. We have more money so we spend more. In the end, we still have nothing to show for it. We feast our eyes on our great resources but they are not being used. They

sit there on the shelf while others do without, but we crave more.

The poor man, who works hard for his food, after a hard day of work, comes home and sleeps well. The rich man who sits around all day eating and enjoying life tosses and turns all night, unable to sleep. With wealth comes concerns and worries. The simple life of the poor man is uncluttered. Money and possessions cannot buy peace and simplicity of life.

“Hoarded wealth”, says Solomon, “can bring great harm” (verse 13). I am reminded of the children of Israel wandering through the desert feasting on manna. God chose to give them only what they needed for each day so they would learn to depend on Him. Those who sought to accumulate more than their daily need found that the manna went bad and bred maggots (see Exodus 16:20). Hoarded wealth that is not being used for the glory of God will go bad and only end up harming the owner.

We are reminded in verse 14 of how easy it would be for us to lose the wealth we have. Solomon saw those who had lost all they had accumulated in this life. These individuals had nothing to pass on to their children. What would it take for you to lose everything you have by some tragedy? At best our vast resources dangle dangerously on a thin string. The slightest breath of God could send them plunging in to the depths where we would see them no more.

Solomon reminds us in verses 15 and 16 that the day is coming when we will all die. When we go to the grave we take nothing with us. We came naked into this world and we leave in the same manner. We live our lives as though we were going to always have our possessions. We

accumulate more than we need and often don't even fully enjoy the things we do have. All we have will be taken from us at death.

Materialism's greatest enemy is satisfaction. Materialism feasts on dissatisfaction and greed. Solomon reminds us of the blessing of satisfaction. To enjoy the toil of our hands and the possessions God has given us is a rich blessing. Contentment is one of life's most precious gifts from God. He who is content with his lot in life, however small that is, is richly blessed.

Discontent with what God has given only leads to bitterness and grumbling. Discontent people eat their rich food in darkness, frustration, affliction and anger, Solomon tells us in verse 17. Their lives are miserable.

It is true that the poor are often oppressed at the expense of the rich, but the rich are no better for it. They cannot keep what they accumulate. Death strips it from them. Their endless pursuit of riches leaves them discontent and unhappy. For Solomon there is no true meaning in a life caught up in the pursuit of possessions and wealth.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this section about materialism and its danger?
- Have you ever found yourself surrendering to the god of materialism? Take a moment to look at what you have? Have you got more than you could possible enjoy?

- How can you use the blessings God has given you for His glory?
- In your pursuit of more money and possessions, have you found yourself guilty of not enjoying even the simple things God has given? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have complained and grumbled about the things He has given you.
- Ask God to teach you the art of godly satisfaction.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you.
- Ask the Lord to show you how to use what He has given you for His glory.

11

ENJOYMENT OF POSSESSIONS

Read Ecclesiastes 6:1-9

Solomon continues on the theme of wealth and possessions. In the last meditation, he challenged us to learn to be satisfied with the good things God has given. This satisfaction leads to joy and peace in life. The endless pursuit of possessions is not an answer to the meaning of life. It only leaves its pursuers empty.

According to Solomon in verse 1, there is a great evil that weighs heavily on the heart of man. What is this evil? God gives us wealth, possessions and honor so that our hearts lack nothing they desire, but He does not let us enjoy these blessings. Instead they are given to someone else to enjoy. What does Solomon mean by this?

We have already seen how man gives himself to the pursuit of wealth and possessions but he never seems to have enough. The more we have, the bigger our appetite for these things becomes. We have all heard of individuals who spent their lives accumulating possessions and wealth only to die before they could enjoy the things they

accumulated. We cannot take our possessions with us. Ultimately someone else will inherit what we have worked so hard to achieve. This, according to Solomon, was meaningless.

It is important for us to note that Solomon tells us that it is God who refuses to allow these individuals to enjoy the blessings they accumulate. Why does God give and refuse to allow them to enjoy? Solomon reminded us in the last meditation that one of the greatest blessings in life was the gift of satisfaction and contentment. This, he says, was a gift from God. We can assume from this that it is the will of God that we have this satisfaction and enjoy the blessings He has given. The apostle Paul challenged Timothy to:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (1 Timothy 6:17)

From this we understand that God give us His blessing for our enjoyment. It is His will that when He gives us something, we enjoy it and give Him thanks. No one gives a gift to someone with the hope that they will never enjoy it. Why then are the people Solomon speaks about in this chapter not experiencing joy in the blessings of God? Could it be because they have become caught up into the trap of materialism? Have their possessions become gods to them. When our possessions become gods, the joy of having them departs. As gods, our possessions are cruel masters. If we serve them it will only be at the cost of sacrificing our joy and contentment in life.

There is an important principle here for us to learn. Anything that becomes an obsession and a god in our life will

take away our joy and blessing. Let me share a personal illustration of this. When my wife and I were in language study in preparation for going to the island of Mauritius, one of the suggestions of the language school was that we try to speak French at home. I took this matter seriously and forced myself to think and speak in French only. When I caught myself thinking through something in English, I would force myself to stop and think it through in French. I refused to speak even to my wife in English. The matter of learning this language became an obsession to me. For five years of my life, I spoke and thought in French. When we arrived in Mauritius, we experienced a number of struggles. Our oldest daughter was born with several problems. The ministry to which God had called us was very stressful. All these things were taking their toll on our personal lives. Throughout this time, I maintained my "commitment" to mastering the French language. I remember a time when my wife, under the stress of the moment broke down. She spoke in English and I would answer her in French. I remember her asking me with tears in her eyes: "Why can't we even speak the same language?" The joy and blessing of mastering this language was taking its toll on my marriage. It had become a god to me. As a god, it was indeed a cruel master. It was stripped me of my joy and blessing. It was impacting my relationship with my wife.

This is what distinguishes the one true God from all other gods. As we give ourselves to God, we find true meaning, purpose and satisfaction. All other gods take this from us. We were created in the image of God and nothing can replace God in our lives. Solomon discovered that the pursuit of material things in life did not satisfy the deep questions of man's heart. They left man barren and empty. To spend one's life pursuing happiness and joy in possessions will only leave us empty. This, according to Solomon, was one of life's greatest evils. How many lives have been

destroyed by the pursuit of money and possessions? How many lives have been wasted in the pursuit of meaning in possessions?

Solomon tells us in verse 3 that a man can have a hundred children and live a long life but if he cannot enjoy them what meaning is there in life? This man would live a joyless life and die to be forgotten forever. "What is the purpose of such a life? Wouldn't a stillborn child be better off than such a man?" asks Solomon.

The child who dies at birth, says Solomon in verse 4, comes without meaning, departs into the darkness of death and his name is no longer remembered. In many ways, this is what the life of the man who does not enjoy life is like. He lives his life without meaning, dies, and is forgotten. The difference between the man who lives without enjoying the blessings of God is that, unlike the stillborn child, he has had to face years of meaningless existence. The stillborn baby, however, has not known the pain and turmoil. He simply comes and goes in quiet peace. The stillborn child knows more rest than does this man. This man may live "a thousand years twice" (verse 6) but what purpose has his life if he does not enjoy what he has? Often we search the world over to find meaning and purpose only to return to where we started to find it. After years of searching we realize that God had already given us all we need.

There is another thing that Solomon saw as futile. "All our efforts are for the mouth," he observed in verse 7. We spend our lives trying to satisfy our fleshly appetites yet those appetites are never satisfied? In this regard, both the wise and the foolish are the same. Both the rich and the poor live to feed an appetite that will never be satisfied. They will all perish and be buried beside each other in the

grave. There was, according to Solomon, a certain futility to all of this. In this regard, what benefit did wisdom have over foolishness?

He concludes with one final comment in verse 9. What the eye sees is better than the "roving appetite" (NIV) or "the wandering desire" (KJV, RSV). Let's take a moment to consider this statement. Solomon has told us that the appetite is never satisfied. It continues to crave more and more. Look around you for a moment. What has the Lord given you? What are His blessings in your life? Take a moment and look at them. Fill your eyes with these blessings and feast upon them for an instant. Let the sight of them fill your heart with satisfaction and thanksgiving. Praise the Lord for His goodness and grace in giving these things to you. Let your heart be satisfied in them.

Now take a moment and consider your "roving appetite," or "wandering desire." These are the things you want but don't have; the things you would like to do given the chance. Where do these appetites and desires leave you? Do they leave you dissatisfied with what you have? Are these desires for more ever satisfied? When you reach your goal, are you happier than you were at the start? Do our possessions bring contentment and happiness?

Solomon tells us that it is better for us to enjoy what our eyes see around us (what God has already given) than to get caught up with the pursuit of things we only wish we had. How many sins are the result of not learning to be content with what we have? Instead of being satisfied, we surrender to the "roving appetite" or "wandering desire."

Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:9-10

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

What is true for money is also true in every other aspect of our lives as well. How many of us want to see our situations in life changed? "If only this or that were changed in our lives," we say, things would be different. We spend our lives seeking something better or complaining about what we have instead of learning to be content. Godliness with contentment is great gain, not only when it comes to our financial situation but also in every other area of our lives as well. May God teach us the art of being content with what He has given. Could it be that God has already given you the answer to your needs but you simply do not recognize it?

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to look around you at the blessings God has given. What has God given you?
- Have you fallen into the trap of following the "roving appetite" or "wandering desire?" Where does this lead in the end?
- How content are you with the things God has given?

- To what extent has our society fallen into the trap of following the "roving appetite?" Has this made us a happier people?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to show you afresh the wonderful blessings He has put in your life.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have gotten caught up in the pursuit of the things of this world.
- Ask God to give you a contentment and satisfaction with the things He has given.
- Ask God to forgive you for the grumbling and complaining spirit that is a result of not being content with His purposes.

12

ACCEPTING THE INEVITABLE

Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12

Solomon has been reminding us in the last couple of meditations that contentment is a very precious gift from God. He who has learned to be content and surrenders to God's purpose has learned the secret of joy and peace in life. Solomon now reminds us that there are certain things in life that are inevitable. These things we cannot control.

Whatever Exists has been named (verse 10)

Is there really anything new under the sun? God has given us all we have. We have, in our modern age, been successful in manipulating the material God has given us to produce new things, but all that we have comes from something that already exists. There is nothing new.

The fact that there is nothing new shows us that things are the way they are and they will not change. There are things we simply need to accept in life. What has happened to us has happened to others before us. Our struggles are not unique. The same struggles will happen to those who

come after us. The fact that these things have been named shows us that they have been identified long ago. They still exist. There are things in life that we will simply have to accept. This is the reality of living in this world.

What Man is has been known (verse 10)

There are those that tell us that man is changing or evolving. The fact of the matter is that man, in reality, has never really changed at all. We live today in a different world from our forefathers but our human nature has remained unchanged. We still struggle with the same sins. Our society is plagued by the same problems. Solomon speaks in this book about the problem of materialism in his day. Nothing has changed. We still struggle with this problem in our day. The Bible still speaks relevantly to us in our day not only because it was inspired by God for all times but also because it speaks to a human nature that has never changed.

We Cannot Contend with one who is Stronger than us (verse 10)

There are times in life when we will simply have to surrender to things that are stronger than us. While we may not want to surrender, there are circumstances and situations that we cannot compete with. We are forced to give in. It is not always easy for us to accept those things we cannot change. It requires tremendous wisdom to know when we need to press on to see change and when we need to surrender and learn to be content with those things we cannot change.

The More the Words the Less the Meaning (verse 11)

As words are multiplied, the potential for problems increases. The more we speak, the more chance there is of being misunderstood. Solomon challenges us to be people who carefully weigh our words. This again is one of those things we cannot change. No matter how careful we are with the use of our words, there will always be those who do not understand us or who misjudge our intentions.

Who knows what is good for us in this Life (verse 12)

Who of us can really tell what is best for another? How many times do we concern ourselves with questions about what we should or should not do? How many times have we looked back at our lives and wondered if it would not have been better for us to do something else? Would things have turned out better had we made another choice? The reality of the matter is that none of us really knows what is best for our lives. We cannot see into the future. We will never fully understand the implications of our actions. God alone knows these things. We will have to live our lives with the understanding that we only see part of the picture.

Who can tell what will happen after we are gone (verse 12)

Once again, who can tell what will happen when we are gone from this earth? Only God knows the future. These things are completely hidden to us unless they are revealed by God Himself. As human beings, there are huge gaps in our understanding and wisdom.

What does all of this have to do with us today? Solomon is showing us who we really are. He is reminding us of our

frailty. We do not have all the answers to the questions of life. There are many things we cannot change. There are circumstances that are stronger than us. We make decisions not knowing the implications. Despite our great advances in technology we are still not in control of our own lives.

Solomon understood, that even with all his wisdom and wealth, there were still many things beyond his control. There were things that wisdom and wealth could not change. At best, we are weak and unwise. We are not in control of the events and circumstances of our lives. God alone has the full picture. We are in desperate need of God.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider what we have been speaking about in this meditation. What are the things you cannot control in your life?
- Why is it so hard for us to admit that we are not in control of our lives and circumstances?
- What difference does it make when we come to realize that we are not in control of our lives and circumstances?
- Is it possible to be content when we cannot change our circumstances?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you lived your life as though you were in complete control.
- Ask the Lord to help you to realize who you really are and show you how much you need Him.
- Commit yourself afresh to God and His keeping. Ask Him to help you to depend more on Him and His wisdom than on yourself.
- Thank the Lord that He is in control.

13

SORROW AND MOURNING

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-6

In the culture of Solomon's day, riches and wealth were common. With this wealth came the search for pleasure and entertainment. Certainly during the reign of David singers and entertainers were plentiful in the land. In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon told us that he had tried to seek meaning and purpose in pleasure but came to the conclusion that "laughter was foolish."

Solomon continues to share his insights on this matter of laughter and merriment in life. He begins in verse 1 by telling us that a good name is worth more than fine perfume. You can have all the luxuries life has to offer but none of these luxuries can compare to a good reputation. What advantage is there to having everything our heart desires if we do not have a name that people can trust and respect? With a good name comes friendship. The respect and confidence of those around us is worth more than fine perfume or the luxuries of life. You may fill your home with anything your heart desires but what use is it if you spend your life alone because you have, by your dealings with people, shut them out of your life?

"The day of one's death is better than the day of his birth," says Solomon (verse 1). This is a very hard statement. What does Solomon mean by this? We need to understand this statement in the context of what Solomon is saying in this book about life in general. He has been disappointed by life. Life has left him empty. He has explained to us the futility of seeking purpose and meaning in the things of this world. Solomon refused himself no pleasure or possession but he could not find purpose or ultimate satisfaction. He also saw the injustice that is part of this sin cursed earth. He knew the pain and toil people went through simply to survive. He understood that everything we work so hard to achieve would ultimately be taken from us in death. After a life of strain, toil, difficulty and pain we would die and lose everything. At least in death, there was rest from ones labors. In death, man could experience peace. Birth, however, is the beginning of trials and pain, death ends them all.

In verse 2, Solomon went on to say that it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting because death is the destiny of every man. Have you ever been in a "house of feasting?" In these places of merriment, what is the attitude? Very often in our parties and celebrations there is a denial of life and its real trials. We laugh and celebrate and forget the harsh realities around us. We say things we do not mean. We do things we should not do. Solomon saw many of these parties and celebrations. As he watched, he saw a people who denied reality. They were there to escape life. Wisdom and understanding had no place in these gatherings.

In the houses of mourning, however, people were brought face to face with the reality of life. As they looked death in the face, they were forced to examine their own lives. They felt different because they knew they could be next. They

left with a greater determination to make what was left of their life count. As Solomon looked around him, he saw that the people coming from the houses of feasting remained unchanged. Those coming from the houses of mourning, however, were given cause to reflect on life.

Solomon is not condemning the celebration of the good things in life. He clearly tells us elsewhere that the enjoyment of the blessing of God is a wonderful gift from God. The reality is that all of us will pass from this life to the next. The house of mourning teaches us more about life and its realities than does the house of feasting.

In a very similar way, Solomon tells us in verse 3 that sorrow is better than laughter. We should not understand from this that Solomon has a problem with laughter. In chapter Ecclesiastes 3:4, Solomon told us that there is a time to laugh. In Proverbs 17:22 we read:

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

Laughter and a cheerful heart is good medicine. We can all attest to the healing power of laughter to release stress and ease the pain of the moment. The question we need to ask ourselves, however, is this. Do we learn more about life in laughter or in sorrow? When are you the closest to God, in laughter or in sorrow? While there may be some exceptions to the rule, generally speaking, we are closer to God in the valleys of life than when everything is going right. Priorities are shifted in the hard times. Greater lessons are learned in sorrow than in laughter. If a cheerful heart is good medicine so is a grieving heart.

It is for this reason that Solomon tells us that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning while the fool is found

in the house of pleasure. Wisdom grows in the house of mourning. Wisdom is sharpened through the hard experiences of life. Wise people have often suffered much in life.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Those who are the greatest comforters are those who have needed to be comforted themselves. Those who can minister best to hurting people are those who have themselves understood hurt. Those who know nothing about the "house of mourning" are of no comfort to those who are presently there. Wisdom flows out of experience. The wise have been through the house of mourning and gained much from it.

The rebuke of a wise man, says Solomon in verse 5, is better than the songs of the fool. It is not always easy to listen to the wisdom of the wise man when we are challenged to consider our ways. The song of the fool, however, is light and comforting. It is soothing to the ears and pleasant to the eyes but brings no change. The rebuke of the wise man sometimes cuts deeply. It penetrates our wrong thoughts and attitudes. It reveals us for who we really are but in the end brings growth and renewal.

Like the crackling of thorns under the pot is the laughter of the fool, Solomon tells us in verse 6. They make all kinds of noise. They laugh and shout and express their joy and merriment, but like these thorns, they are being consumed. The noise they make is the noise of the fire consuming

them. The enemy has blinded them. Their lives consist of parties and celebrations. They laugh loudly and celebrate till all hours of the morning. Their celebrations are short-lived. They are consumed in the end by the laughter they crave.

Solomon teaches us in this passage that the place of laughter and merriment is not always the place of greatest growth and wisdom. The valleys of life also have their role to play. Great lessons are learned in the valley. To shrink back from these valleys is to miss the wisdom they offer to us.

For Consideration:

- Compare the "house of mourning" with the "house of feasting and pleasure." What difference do you see in these two places?
- Where have you learned the greatest lessons in life?
- What is the prevailing attitude in the "houses of feasting and pleasure?"
- Are you in the "house of mourning" right now? What lessons is God teaching you through this?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to understand the lessons He wants to teach you in the difficulties He is taking you through right now.
- Do you know individuals who live for "pleasure and feasting?" Ask God to help them understand that

there is more to life. Ask Him to reveal Himself to them in a deeper way.

- Ask God to forgive you for times you have grumbled and complained about going through the "house of mourning." Ask Him to show you, in a deeper way, how this is a place of growth and renewal.

14

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON LIFE

Read Ecclesiastes 7:7-18

Much like he does in the book of Proverbs, Solomon takes time now to share a whole series of observations on life in general. These observations seem to be a collection of insights with no particular theme. We will take the time to examine each of his observations individually.

Extortion and bribes corrupt the heart (7)

The first observation Solomon makes is that extortion turns a wise man into a fool and bribes corrupt the heart. Money and possessions can be a powerful force in the lives of those they touch. For the sake of money and possessions, a man is willing to cast aside wisdom. Though an individual knows what is right, his love for money and possessions can cause him to do what wisdom tells him is wrong. For the love of money and possessions, a man will willingly allow his heart to be corrupted. Was this not the sin of the Garden of Eden? Satan tempted Eve by showing her that

the tree was good for food, pleasant to see and could offer great wisdom. Her desire to have these things caused her to willingly throw away everything God had given. We know the result of this in the world. Sin entered and destroyed the perfect world God created.

Many have turned their backs on God out of love of possessions and money. Satan knows the powerful attraction there is for us in the things of this world. Morals can be corrupted by the love of money and possessions. Our faith can be shipwrecked by the love of this world. In his life Solomon saw many wise individuals fall prey to extortion and bribes.

Patience is better than Pride (8)

"The end of a matter is better than the beginning, and patience is better than pride," Solomon says. In his lifetime Solomon saw many individuals who began well but failed in the end. How easy it is to boast of the great things we are going to achieve only to find out that we cannot achieve them. Better to be patient and wait than to proudly boast and be proven wrong.

The fool and his anger (9)

"Anger resides in the lap of the fool." The fruit of anger is unpredictable, but it is generally not good. Solomon reminds us that we are not to be quick to become angry. How often have we said things we did not mean or did things we should not have done because we were angry? Knowing the devastation that anger can cause, only a fool would be quick to get angry. What is spoken in an angry moment may take years to repair.

Living in the past (10)

We have all met people who live in the past. It is true that not all change is good. To ask the question: "Why were the old days better than these?" however, is not always productive. The reality is that we cannot go back to the "good old days." There are people who cannot live in the present because they have never left the past. While it is good for us to learn from the past, none of us can return to it. We have only the present. He who lives in the past cannot truly impact the future.

The benefit of wisdom (11-12)

Solomon has a deep appreciation for wisdom. Wisdom, he tells us, brings certain benefits in life. Wisdom, like money, is a shelter (defense, KJV). How is money a shelter for us? Money can buy a home. With money, we can buy clothes to keep warm. It provides us with the necessary food to survive. In our society, there is not too much that we can do without money. While money can buy a house, that house is kept by wisdom. Wisdom shelters us from many trials and sorrows in life. He who acts wisely keeps himself from much sorrow and pain. Wisdom and knowledge preserve the life of its possessor.

Accepting God's purposes (13-15)

There are many things in life that cannot change. What God has designed to be crooked cannot be straightened. If you bend a branch too quickly it will snap. How many times have we tried to do this with our problems in life? We want things to change and we want them to change right now. You cannot change what God has no intention of changing. You cannot change things before God's time.

We cannot control the circumstances of our lives. All of us will have good times and bad times in life. There are days when we felt like we are walking on the mountaintop, above all our problems. There are times when we to go through the dry and barren wilderness and everything seems to be going wrong. Many times we do not have control over these things. We simply need to learn how to live with our circumstances.

When times are good, says Solomon, be happy. Learn to rejoice in these times. Let your heart overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving to God for these times. When times are bad, on the other hand, consider that God has made one as well as the other. We do not always like to see things in this way. It is much easier to say that all our trials and tribulations come from Satan. Here we are challenged to accept even the bad times as from the Lord. God has allowed us to pass through these valleys. When Satan wanted to afflict Job, he needed permission from the Lord. God gave permission to Satan to afflict his servant, but used it in Job's life to draw him closer to Himself. It is easier to accept our trials when we understand that they are permitted by our loving heavenly Father who has our best interest in mind. When times are bad, realize that God has allowed these bad times to come into our lives for a reason. Let God have His way. Wait patiently and let Him accomplish His purpose.

A man cannot discover anything about his future (verse 14). What does Solomon mean by this? This statement needs to be seen in light of what he has just told us about God allowing both the good and the bad times of life. God's ways are not our ways. We cannot, unless He particularly reveals it to us, understand what His intentions are when He calls us to go through the barren desert. We do not know the future. We do not know what God is doing. In

those hard times, realize that God does know the future. As the sovereign God, He is working out the details of our lives. When times are good, be happy and rejoice. When things are not going well, remember that God knows what He is doing. He has a purpose in it for you. Trust Him.

In verse 15, Solomon reminds us that in his life he had seen the righteous perish and the wicked live long and prosperous lives. What he is telling us is that there are things in life that we cannot understand. God's ways are much higher than ours. We cannot change what God is doing. All we can do is trust Him.

Avoiding extremes (16-18)

In verses 16 to 18, Solomon gives us a word of advice regarding extremes in life. Don't be over righteous or over wise, he tells us, or you will destroy yourselves. Is it possible to be too righteous or too wise? What does Solomon mean by this statement? There are many ways of being "over righteous." The Pharisees of Jesus day could be classified in this category. They were extremely rigid in their observation of the Law of Moses. For them, obedience to the Law of Moses was everything. They became a harsh and legalistic people. The law meant everything. People meant nothing. Their legalistic observance of the law hurt people in ways God never intended people to be hurt. Imagine that you are driving a dying person to the hospital. As he sits in the car, you know that every moment counts. If you do not get him to the hospital on time, he will very likely die. There before you on the highway is a sign that tells you that you are not to go beyond 100 kilometers per hour (60 miles per hour). What do you do in this situation? To go beyond the speed limit is to break the law. To do the speed limit is to have the person beside you die. The Pharisees elevated the law. If the person died, he

died. What was important to the Pharisee was that he obey the law regardless of the consequences. Jesus criticized this heartless observation of the law. In their observation of the law the Pharisees neglected more important matters such as mercy and compassion.

What is true of the observation of the law can also be true in doctrine or other practices. In the name of "righteousness" I have seen tremendous hurt. I have seen believers divide over differences of opinion on a secondary doctrinal issue. In the name of doctrinal purity, believers are willing to condemn, criticize and destroy one another. Is this not a case of being "over righteous?"

Moderation is vital in this life. While Solomon is not encouraging mediocrity in the Christian life, he is condemning extremes. The godly man will keep from extremes.

Solomon is challenging us here to maintain balance in our practice of righteousness. In verse 18, he tells us that it is important to understand what wickedness is. We are to understand the nature of evil but hold firmly to wisdom and righteousness. It is important that we understand what Solomon is telling us here.

Not everything that appears to be evil really is. What appears to be righteous may be evil. What does it mean to grasp the concept of evil and wickedness? It means that we need to understand it in a deeper way. We cannot judge something as evil or good without looking at the motives and intentions. Breaking the speed limit to save my friend's life may appear to be evil to the person who does not understand my intention but to God it is the compassionate thing to do. Solomon's challenge here is for us to understand what true evil is. Don't be confused by what

you see on the outside. Let wisdom and true righteousness guide you in what is right and pure.

For Consideration:

- Why is it so easy for us to be sidetracked in our spiritual lives by the things of this world? What particular temptation do you have that takes you from the Lord?
- Are there things in your life that you cannot change even though you would like to see them changed? What does this section teach us about these things?
- How does the knowledge that the Lord controls both the good and the bad times change our attitude towards those times?
- What does this section of Ecclesiastes teach us about balance in the Christian life? Why is it so easy for us to lose this balance?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to control your anger.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not accepted the struggles and trials that have come your way.
- Have you ever been guilty of extremes in your life? Ask the Lord to help you to find balance in your walk with Him.

15

MORE OBSERVATIONS ON LIFE

Read Ecclesiastes 7:19-29

Solomon has been sharing insights on life in general. As in the last meditation, there is no particular theme in this section. He speaks on a variety of subjects. Let's examine what he has to say about life in the remainder of this chapter.

The Power of Wisdom (19)

Solomon begins by showing us something of the power of wisdom. Wisdom can make one man more powerful than ten rulers of a city, he tells us. Wisdom is more powerful than strength. Though the wise man is physically weaker than his opponents, he knows how to channel the resources he has. Wisdom is able to use the small resources it has to its advantage. It is better to be wise than to have strength. Wisdom allows us to use our resources to their fullest potential.

All sin (20)

Paul tells us in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Solomon tells us the same thing here. In his experience with life, he never met a man or woman who did not sin and fall short of the standard God set out in His Word. Even those whose desire was to serve the Lord with all their heart fell short of His standard. As hard as we try, we are not able to live the life God requires. How we need to praise the Lord for His grace and forgiveness. There is not a day that passes by that we do not have to wrestle with our sinful nature. It is a constant reminder to us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Where would we be without His forgiveness?

Turning a deaf ear (21-22)

Knowing the nature of man to sin should cause us to turn a deaf ear to the things we hear at times. The apostle James says this about the human tongue in James 3:7-8):

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

The tongue is probably one of the most difficult things for us to control. How much hurt has been caused by the tongue? In his wisdom, Solomon learned not to take what he heard too seriously. In fact, he encourages us not to pay too much attention to what people say. The more we hear, the more likely it is that we will get hurt.

The Search for Wisdom (23-25)

Solomon had a determination in life. He wanted to be wise. This was something he asked God for early in his reign. God honored his request, enabling Solomon to be the wisest man on the earth. Notice, however, what he says about this wisdom.

Firstly, he was determined to be wise. This was a particular vision for him in life. He hungered for wisdom. When God gives a gift, He also places a desire for that gift on our heart. Wisdom became Solomon's passion.

Notice secondly in verse 23 that though he had more wisdom than anyone on the earth, he still believed that wisdom was beyond him. There is humility in Solomon here. The more we know, the more we understand what we don't know. Notice that God not only gave Solomon wisdom but also gave him the humility to cope with that wisdom. In the course of church history, often the most gifted of men have been driven to discouragement in the ministries to which God has called them. Often God uses this to drive us to greater dependence on him.

Notice in verse 25 that while God gave the gift of wisdom to Solomon, he still needed to develop that gift. Solomon was very active in his search for wisdom and understanding. He gave himself fully to developing the gift God had given him. Solomon sets his mind to search out wisdom. He invested his resources into the gift God has given. The result was a strengthening of that gift in his life. How many times do the gifts of God lie dormant waiting to be developed and used for the sake of the kingdom?

Women (26-28)

Solomon's experience with women was quite extensive. Being the husband of one thousand wives he shares his experience and wisdom with us in these next few verses.

According to Solomon, there was a type of woman he found to be more "bitter than death." He tells us something about this woman in this verse. What are the characteristics of this woman who is more bitter than death?

She is a snare and her heart is a trap

Notice the words Solomon uses to describe this particular woman. She was both a snare and a trap. Any hunter knows that if he is to trap an animal, he must make the snare or trap look appealing to the victim. He must conceal the real intention of the trap. No victim will willingly fall into a trap. They must be attracted into it by deception. There is a type of woman who is like this, says Solomon. She sets out to achieve her desires by manipulation and cunning ruse. She will use her natural beauty and emotions to play on her victims. With deception and cunning, she lures them into her trap.

Her hands are chains

The woman Solomon speaks about here is a woman whose hands are chains. While the snare and the trap capture the victim, the chains hold the victim. It seems that what Solomon is speaking about here is a controlling type of woman who not only succeeds in trapping her victim but continues to manipulate and control him to get her own way.

The man who wants to please God, says Solomon, will stay away from this type of woman. He will not allow her to ensnare him and keep him from taking his responsibilities seriously. Living with this type of woman, Solomon said, was more bitter than death.

Solomon goes on to share what he had found in life. "I have found one man in a thousand but could not discover a single woman" (verse 28). The context indicates that Solomon was searching for wisdom and understanding. That wisdom and understanding was rare among men. Only one in a thousand could be considered wise. In the days of Solomon, this was rarer among women. Why was this so? Obviously, there was a cultural reason for this as women were not encouraged to express themselves. They were expected to fulfill a different role in life.

Amos the prophet lived in a day somewhat like the day of Solomon. He prophesied in a day when there was relative ease and prosperity in the land. In chapter 4 of his prophecy, he speaks specifically to the women of the land. Listen to what he says:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" (Amos 4:1)

These women were very much like the woman Solomon speaks about here. They were not concerned about the meaning of life. They were content simply to stay at home telling their husbands what to do. While their husbands occupied themselves with the affairs of life, the wives enjoyed the fruit of their husband's labour. While things have changed in our day, at least in the days of Solomon,

women were content to let their husbands do their thinking for them.

What is important for us to note here is that Solomon grieves over this issue. He “looked” for a wise and upright woman. He wanted to see such a companion but was not able to find one in his day. Solomon is not putting women down in this passage. If anything, he questions a society that would not allow women to gain wisdom and express themselves in godly ways.

The Upright man and evil schemes (29)

Solomon concludes with this statement. God made man to be upright and good but man turned away to do his own will. This in reality is the source of the problems and injustice in life. It is not God who is unjust, it is man. God is not the author of sin. Mankind has taken what God has given him and corrupted it. Only by getting back to God and His purposes can we again experience life as it was meant to be lived.

Solomon observes that life is not what God intended it to be. He grieves over the lack of wisdom and godliness. He laments the abuse of power and manipulation he sees in society. Life on this earth is far from perfect. Solomon is given eyes to see what God sees. He grieves over the effects of sin. He reminds us that if life is going to be all that God intended, sin and evil will need to be addressed.

For Consideration:

- How often have your words gotten you into trouble? To what extent is the tongue a problem in your Christian fellowship or personal life?
- What do we learn from verses 23-25 about spiritual gifts?
- What was the temptation for women in Solomon's day? Do you struggle with these temptations today?
- Have you ever sought to manipulate or control another person? What is the alternative to manipulation and control?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you wisdom to use the resources He has blessed you with today.
- Thank the Lord for His forgiveness even though you do not always measure up to His standard.
- Have you ever found yourself turning from God to follow your own 'schemes'? Ask God to help you to trust in Him and His purposes. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you wandered from Him.
- Ask God to give you grace to trust Him with the affairs of your life. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have sought to manipulate people to get your way.

RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-6

Solomon begins this section by speaking about the advantages of wisdom. "Wisdom brightens a man's face," he tells us in verse 1. There are a number of ways that wisdom can brighten the face of the one who obtains it. Wisdom warns of the dangers ahead and shows us how to avoid these dangers. Wisdom teaches the one it possesses how to act in the presence of authorities and obtain their favor. Wisdom simplifies life. Wisdom reduces stress and tension. It gives direction and meaning to life. The result is a person who has a calmer spirit than the foolish person. Wisdom can be seen in the face and behavior of the person it possesses.

Solomon moves on from this general statement to share with us his wisdom on the issue of respecting the authority of the king. "Obey the king because you took an oath before God," he tells us in verse 2. It appears that the king's subjects had made an oath of allegiance, promising to faithfully serve their king and country. This oath of allegiance was not only made before the king but also before God, who would hold them accountable for their oath. The

apostle Paul tells us, in Romans 13:1-2, that we are to be obedient to those God has put in authority over us because that authority has been permitted by God.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

Solomon challenges us to be obedient to the authority God has seen fit to place over us. To disregard this authority is to invite the wrath of God. The wise man will respect authority. Only when this authority is in direct contradiction of the higher authority of God are we given the right to resist it (Acts 5:29).

In verse 3, we are told that we should not be quick to leave the king's presence. The idea seems to be one of loyalty. We are challenged to faithfulness and loyalty to the king. Do not be in a hurry to abandon your post. Stand firm and loyal to the person that God has put in authority over you. To do otherwise would, according to Solomon, be standing for a bad thing. This, says Solomon, is unwise. Remember that the king does whatever he pleases. It is unwise to get on his bad side. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 13:3-5:

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing.

He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

It is unwise to invite the wrath of God by disregarding the authority of those He has put over us. The authorities that exist have God's approval to exercise discipline on the earth.

The king's word, says Solomon, is supreme. We must not question his authority (verse 4). Only the fool would rebel against this authority. The wise man will remain faithful and experience the favour of the king.

Whoever obeys the king will come to no harm (verse 5). In the king's favour is blessing and protection. He has been given to us for our good. Honour and respect him and you will receive his favour.

The wise heart knows the proper time and procedure (5-6). There is a proper time and place for everything. Even when misery weighs heavily on us, this same principle applies. How many times, when things are not as we think they should be, have we taken matters into our own hands and rebelled against the authority that God has placed over us. Solomon reminds us that there is a proper time and place for everything. The wise man will not be too quick to rebel against an authority that God has placed over him. He will respect that authority even if things are difficult. He will not take matters into his own hands but wait on God and his timing.

Solomon teaches us that respect for authority is essential in any society. We should not be quick to stand up against

the authority God has placed over us. If there is one thing worse than the rule of an evil person, it is uncontrolled rejection of authority by the masses. Solomon challenges us again to realize that authority is necessary if we are to function as a whole. We cannot survive if everyone does as he pleases without concern for each other.

For Consideration:

- Who are those God has placed in authority over you? Have you been showing them the respect they deserve?
- Many problems have been caused by those who have abused their authority. When is it appropriate to get out from under this authority?
- How does the Lord Jesus give us an example of how authority should be exercised?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive you for the times you turned your back on the authority He placed over you.
- Take a moment to pray for those who are in authority over you. Ask the Lord to help them to exercise their authority in a godly way.

THE INJUSTICE AND UNCERTAINTIES OF LIFE

Read Ecclesiastes 8:7-17

Life, according to Solomon, is full of injustice and uncertainty. Who among us knows the future? The future belongs to God. He alone knows what is to come. As human beings, we face each new day with the uncertainty of what it will bring.

Who among us can control the wind (verse 8)? Can you tell the wind to move in a certain direction or to stop blowing? The King James Version of the Bible translates the word "wind" by the word "spirit." In either case the same principle applies? There are certain things that you and I cannot control. Even as you cannot control the wind or the spirit, so you cannot control the day of your death. This day is only known to God. We cannot say: "It's not convenient for me to die today." We can't tell death to come back another day. When death comes, we must surrender whether we like it or not. We cannot choose the day and circumstances.

During times of war, a soldier is not discharged. Can you imagine a soldier in the midst of battle going over to his commanding officer and saying "Sir, I need a break. This war is getting to me. I'd like to take a vacation for a week?" What do you suppose the response of his commanding officer would be? Wouldn't he tell him to pick up his gun and get right back in line? This is no time for a holiday. This is a time of war. Solomon tells us that even as a soldier is not discharged in a time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it. It would be easier for a soldier to take a holiday in the midst of a battle than for wickedness to release its grip on those under its control.

There is another thing that can gain control of us. As Solomon looked around him, he saw how power had a tendency to turn against those who held it. There is a time, says Solomon, when a man lords it over another to his own hurt. Too much power corrupts. Countless individuals have been destroyed because they did not know how to control the power and authority that was given to them. We have seen this not only in the leaders of nations but also in the cases of leaders in churches. Too much power will eventually go to their heads and do much damage.

As he looked around him, Solomon saw that there were many injustices in life. These things perplexed him and added to what seemed to be the meaninglessness of life in general.

In verse 10, Solomon tells us that he listened to what people said about the wicked at their funerals. These wicked people were praised in the city and looked up to as wonderful people. They used to go in and out of the temple and in so doing they gained the respect and admiration of the people of their city, but they were evil people. This only added to the meaninglessness of life for Solomon. Why

were people blinded by the reality of what these people were really like? Why couldn't they see through this religious front and expose these individuals for the hypocrites they were? Why were the righteous forgotten but the wicked praised? What kind of world do we live in when this happens? There was a certain injustice to this.

Solomon saw in his experience that if a crime was not quickly punished, people would be swift to scheme and plan out how to do further evil. Sometimes the only thing that stops a man from further crime is the fear of punishment. Where would our society be if there was no punishment for crime? Is there not something wrong with society when the only thing that keeps it from crime is the fear of punishment? Does this not tell us something about the nature of the heart of man?

Solomon saw how the wicked could commit one hundred crimes and still live a long time. Sometimes their crimes provided them with more comfort and luxuries in life than the righteous man. Despite this, Solomon knew there was still a very definite advantage to living in reverence for God. God would not abandon His people. He would not forget what the wicked had done. He was a God of justice and would punish sin in the end.

While very often in this sin-cursed earth we do not see justice, the time is coming when things will be made right. We have the assurance that God will deal with that sin and injustice. Let us not lose heart.

How does one live in the light of such uncertainty and injustice? Solomon recommends the enjoyment of what the Lord has given (verse 15). There are enough perplexities in life. There are enough things that bring sorrow and grief. Why should we focus on these things when there are

things we can enjoy? Take a moment to look around you at the good things that God has given. Solomon challenges us, in light of the injustice and uncertainties of life to focus on the blessings. Look at what God has given you. Let your heart rejoice in the goodness of God. Trust Him with the uncertainties and the injustice. Let him carry this burden. In so doing, you will experience joy and blessing in life. Listen to what Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 5:19-20:

Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work--this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

Do you want to experience joy in the midst of injustice and confusion? Learn to rejoice in the little things. Learn to praise God for the things He has given you. Don't get overly concerned and wrapped up in the things He hasn't yet given you. Remember that Solomon tells us that we cannot know the future. While the future is not for us to know, we can learn to rejoice in the present. If we make it our habit to rejoice in what God has given, we will soon find the joy of the Lord filling us to overflowing. We have all met individuals who, having suffered tremendously in this life, are examples of joy and godliness. Christians around the world have been stripped of their jobs, their worldly possessions and their reputations. Many have learned the art of rejoicing in what God has done. There is joy in uncertainty. There is happiness in the midst of injustice. Solomon challenges us to learn the art of rejoicing in the midst of all our confusion and injustice.

Solomon concludes this section by reminding us that there will always be questions that remain unanswered in life. We will not be able to understand the ways of God. You can search all your life and not understand God's purposes and plans. His ways are much higher than our ways. We will ultimately have to come to the place where we simply trust God with the uncertainties and injustice of life.

Do we really think that we can understand the Almighty? Are His ways not beyond us? May God forgive us for believing that He is too small to understand. In the midst of all the uncertainties of life we need to learn the art of trusting God and rejoicing in what He has given. This is the way to peace in the midst of uncertainty.

For Consideration:

- What are the uncertainties you are facing right now in your life? What does this passage challenge you to do with those uncertainties?
- What kind of injustice do you see around you in your society? Is it possible to rejoice in God despite these injustices?
- What are some of the good things God has given you? Have you learned to rejoice in these things?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to consider the blessings you have received from the hand of God. Thank Him for those blessings. Ask Him to help you rejoice in these things.
- Do you have friends or loved ones who are in the midst of trials and sufferings right now? Take a moment to pray for them, that they would not lose sight of God and His blessings in their suffering.
- Thank the Lord that we have a hope of something more. Thank Him that, as a sovereign God, He will deal with the uncertainty and injustice that abounds around us today.

18

THE COMMON DESTINY OF ALL HUMANS

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

Solomon has been reminding us that there are many uncertainties in life. We are not in control of the events of our life and we do not know what awaits us. God alone can determine the course of our short existence here below.

In this life there is one thing that is sure. Whether we are righteous or wicked, we will all have to die. You may live a good life and attend church on a regular basis, but none of these things will keep you from death. You can be the vilest sinner, living your life for yourself and crushing others in the process, but you will not be able to defeat death. Death comes to us all. Whether we are righteous or evil, none of us will escape its grip.

According to verse 4, death is one of our most cruel enemies. Solomon tells us that it is better to be a living dog than to be a dead lion. Elsewhere, Solomon tells us that the dead are better off than the living (see 4:2; 6:3). While

Solomon seems to contradict himself, there is a very definite sense in which both of these statements are true.

The dog was an unclean animal that ate scraps and lived on the street. The dog spoken of here should not be seen as a pet living in the luxuries of the palace. For the most part, the dog was a pest. The lion, on the other hand, was considered to be the king of the beasts. It was known for his great strength and admired for its majesty. Solomon could equally have said: "Better to be alive as a poor beggar than to be rich and famous but dead."

As long as we are alive there is hope. There is hope of bettering our existence. There is hope of being of assistance to others. There is hope of pleasure, joy and fulfillment. In the grave, however, any such hope is gone.

Solomon tells us that the dead have no further reward (verse 5). We know that Scripture tells us clearly that there is a reward for those who have been faithful in service to the Lord. We should not see what Solomon says here to be contrary to the rest of Scripture. Solomon is simply saying that in the grave, any hope of earthly reward is gone. In the grave, there will be no rejoicing over the blessings of life. In the grave, there is no more pleasure or satisfaction in worldly possessions and pleasures. In light of this reality, Solomon has some suggestions for us who are alive:

*Eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with joy
(verse 7)*

In light of the fact that death is our common destiny, Solomon tells us to eat our food with gladness and drink our wine with joy. It is now that God favours what you do;

there will be no rejoicing in our food and drink in the grave; now is the time for us to rejoice in these blessings. God has given you these good things for your enjoyment. Learn to rejoice in what God has given.

Clothe yourself in white and anoint your head with oil (verse 8)

Solomon also tells us that in light of the reality of death we should clothe ourselves in white and anoint our heads with oil. In the heat of the climate in which Solomon lived, white clothing was much more comfortable than dark clothing. Oil protected the skin from drying out in the hot sun. While it may be possible for us to try and read some spiritual significance into this verse, the context would seem to indicate that Solomon is telling us that life is harsh enough. We should seek to be comfortable in this life. We ought not to take any particular pleasure in inflicting unnecessary hardship on ourselves. Again, the idea is to enjoy and make provisions to enjoy the goodness of God amidst the harshness of life.

Enjoy your life with the wife whom you love (verse 9)

Solomon challenges men to enjoy their lives with their wives. Life can be a challenge at the best of times. In light of this, Solomon challenges us to enjoy each other as husbands and wives. This will not always come easily to us. Enjoying each other as husbands and wives will require work on our part. Solomon tells us here that the effort is worth it in the end.

Those of us who understand the blessing of knowing the Lord Jesus as our Savior know that in Him there is meaning and satisfaction. Solomon is not taking away from

this. He simply looks at life from a practical and earthly point of view. He points us to the blessings of God. He does not expect that these blessings will, in themselves, become gods to us. They are to be enjoyed as blessings from God. All too many of us live our lives without enjoying the wonderful things God has given. Don't live your life with your eyes closed to the blessings of God in your midst. Learn to enjoy these rich gifts and delight in them to the glory of His name.

*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might
(verse 10)*

Solomon has one final suggestion for us in this section: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." There will be no planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave. Now is the time to make things happen. Now is the time to make your life count. Why waste the resources God has given? In light of the fact that death stares us in the face, we need to do our best to make what is left count. Why not leave this earth having done our best to make it a better place.

Solomon commends the enjoyment of the good things God has given us. Life is too short to pass these things by. Life is too short not to enjoy the relationships God has given us. It is too short to waste. Let's make the best of it while we have the time. The older we get, the more we understand these things.

For Consideration:

- What are some of the good things God has given you? Take a moment to consider His blessings. Have you been enjoying them?

- What is the difference between enjoying the good things God gives and making those things into gods?
- Do you rejoice in your spouse? What needs to happen for you to be renewed in your relationship with your life partner?
- Are there relationships in your life that need to be mended? What needs to happen for you to restore these relationships?
- Do you enjoy life? If not, what keeps you from enjoying it? What particular blessings do you enjoy?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to mend the relationships that need to be mended in your life.
- Thank God for some of the particular blessings He has given you.
- Thank God for the hope we have that goes beyond the grave.
- Ask God to help you to make what remains of your life count for His glory.

19

THE RACE IS NOT FOR THE SWIFT

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

As Solomon looked around him, he noticed that there were many times when the good and the wise suffered. Sometimes the sinner received more glory and honour than the wise and righteous. Those who deserved a reward did not always receive it, while those who did evil sometimes prospered.

Solomon reminds us that the race is not for the swift. The battle did not always go to the strong. Even the wise man had to suffer for lack of food. Brilliance and learning did not always prosper. There were too many other things in life that could not be controlled. "Time and chance" happen to all men. Let's take a moment to consider the words "time and chance."

We often speak of luck and chance as something that happens without the intervention of God. Solomon believed in a sovereign God who was in control of all the events of life. In the book of Proverbs 16:33 we read:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Solomon understood that God was in control of all of life. When the lot was cast, it was the Lord who controlled it. This principle is all through Scripture. A replacement was chosen for Judas by means of the casting of lots. Those who cast the lots believed that they were leaving this matter to God who would control how the lot fell (see Acts 1:24-26).

Knowing this, what does Solomon mean when he says that time and chance happen to us all. It seems that what Solomon is saying is that there are many things in life that we cannot control. Unexpected events come into our lives to change our plans. Circumstances change and with it so must our plans. Time can change people. Time brings sickness and death. People change their minds. Our needs change. All these things are out of our control. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. Only God knows the future. We must all live with this uncertainty in life.

We are reminded in verse 12, that no one really knows when his hour will come. Like a fish caught in a net or a bird caught in a snare, so circumstances come into our lives. These things come unexpectedly. Hard times may fall on us in an instant. Job lost his family, his health and his possessions. He did not expect this to happen to him. He lived a very secure and happy existence until one day, unexpectedly, everything fell apart. He had no control over

this. Years of hard work and accomplishments were gone in an instant.

In verses 13 to 15, Solomon shares with us an example of unrewarded wisdom. He tells us how he saw a city that was besieged by a very powerful king. In the city was a very poor and wise man. This wise man devised a plan that saved the entire city from the powerful king. While the whole city benefited from this wisdom, no one even remembered the poor man when it was all over. The race is not always won by the swift. Victory does not always come to the strong. There are things that even a very powerful and rich king cannot control. In this illustration, the powerful king was defeated by a poor man.

Brilliance and learning do not always guarantee favour and blessing to those that possess them. This poor man saved the city by his wisdom. While he deserved to be honoured for his deed, he was forgotten. There was nothing he could do about this. We do not always get what we deserve. In this world, we must learn to live with injustice.

“Wisdom,” says Solomon, “is better than strength, and we need to listen to the quiet words of a wise man above the shouts of a powerful leader. Wisdom is far better than weapons of war,” Solomon tells us in verse 18, but the wisdom and blessing of many years can be taken away in an instant by one sinner. Life can be cut short by murder and war. Possessions can be lost through robbery and theft. Reputations can be destroyed through lies and deceit. Many times the innocent suffer. One sinner can destroy much good.

As we look at our society, we see that not much has changed. We are still living in a corrupt and sinful world. We need to live with certain injustices. We need to live with

the uncertainties. What a comfort it is for us to know, however, that in such a world there is One who is ultimately in control. The Lord has promised to return and restore order and justice. We wait for that day with great anticipation.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there around you that the battle is not always won by the strong? Is there evidence of this even in our own society?
- Are there individuals in your church or life who, like the poor man in this section have not been given the honour they deserve? Who are they? What can you do to see that they receive the honour they deserve?
- What uncertainties are there in your life today? Do you have control over these things? What comfort do you find in the fact that God is in control?
- Should we expect to live without injustice in this world? What is the source of this injustice?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He will one day restore order and justice.
- What particular issues of injustice do you see around you? Take a moment to pray that justice would prevail.
- Ask the Lord to help you to put your confidence in Him when you experience this injustice in your life.
- Thank the Lord that He remains in control of the events of life.

20

THE CONSEQUENCES TO OUR ACTIONS

Read Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

In chapter 10, Solomon tells us that the decisions we make in life have consequences. Many of life's problems are the result of unwise decisions. We need to be concerned about the consequences of our actions and decisions.

Flies in the Perfume (1-3)

Solomon begins, in verse 1, by sharing with us how folly outweighs wisdom. We have seen some of this argument in the last meditation. Solomon tells us that a sinner can destroy much good (Ecclesiastes 9:18). Here he illustrates what he means by telling us that a dead fly in the perfume can give it a bad odor. Just a little evil can corrupt goodness. A little foolishness can destroy great wisdom.

When wisdom is used correctly, it can accomplish much. When mixed with foolishness, however, it can do much damage. The same is true for many gifts the Lord gives us.

The gift of leadership, for example, is for the good of the body of Christ but when this gift is corrupted by a desire for power and position it can do great harm. Much damage has been caused in the church by good gifts corrupted by evil desires. These dead flies in the perfume have caused tremendous damage in the church of our day.

“The wise,” says Solomon, “inclines his heart to the right while the fool inclines his heart to the left.” In other words, wisdom seeks that which is right and good while the fool seeks after evil. If you want to know if there is a fly in the perfume, you can know by the smell it gives. In the body of Christ, it is important that we discern the true perfume from the perfume with dead flies in it. When the perfume being offered to the Lord is pure, it inclines its heart to what is right and pure. You can smell the purity of the gifts that are being offered to the Lord. There is the fragrance of the Holy Spirit on these gifts. They reflect pure attitudes and motives. They lead to unity and harmony in the body. The perfume with the dead flies has another odor. It leads to division and chaos within the body. Don't be deceived. Not everyone who serves the Lord does so in purity of heart.

Solomon reminds us in verse 3, that as the fool walks down the road, he shows people how stupid he really is. You cannot hide these matters. Those whose eyes are open can discern the true perfume from the perfume with dead flies. Often in Scripture we read about those who came in the name of the Lord, whose outward appearance was that of godliness but in reality they were “wolves in sheep's clothing” (Matthew 7:15). How important it is for us to discern the flies in the perfume before they do damage to the body of Christ.

A Consequence for Every Action (4-11)

Solomon has shown us that in this life things are not always as they appear. Sometimes the pure perfume has dead flies in it. He moves on from this to a discussion of the consequences of our actions.

"If a ruler's anger rises up against you," says Solomon, "do not leave your post" (verse 4). Imagine a soldier who, for some reason, angered the king. The king has spoken to him and expressed his anger. Imagine now that this soldier became angry himself and decided that he no longer wanted to serve the king. In his bitterness, he abandons his post and leaves the king's service. What would be the result? Would there not be consequences as this soldier has angered the king even more by his actions? Better to remain calm in a situation and not do anything that encourages more anger. Calmness can lay many errors to rest. By choosing to be calm in the situation and accept the rebuke of a ruler, we avoid many problems and errors that we will ultimately regret later on in life. This principle applies to many situations in life. Better not to say or do anything than to stir up more anger and evil.

Rulers are not always right. They, too, make decisions that have negative consequences in life. Solomon saw many bad decisions made by leaders who were unconcerned about the consequences of their actions. This is especially true for leaders who have the power to make important decisions. Solomon tells us that he had seen fools put in positions of high authority while the rich and wise had low positions. He saw slaves travelling on horseback while princes walked on foot like slaves. This evil, says Solomon in verse 5, "arises from rulers." They are the ones to put these people in positions. Obviously, these bad decisions

on the part of the leaders would have consequences in their society.

“There is one thing that we can be sure of,” says Solomon. “If you dig a pit, you risk falling into it yourself (verse 8). If you break through a wall, you risk being bitten by a snake (verse 8). If you quarry stones, you may be injured by them (verse 9). If you split logs, you may be endangered by them” (verse 9). Solomon is telling us that there are consequences for our actions. Rulers who put fools in positions of authority are like people who break through walls only to find a snake waiting to bite them. Their sin will ultimately find them out. You cannot continue to make unwise decisions in life without those decisions coming back on you.

Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, when asked how he would lead his people, listened to his friends rather than the wise elders of the land (see 1 Kings 12). Solomon's own son fell prey to the very thing his father spoke about here. He chose a team of fools to work with him. The result was the division of the nation into two (Israel and Judah). In the context of the church, we need to be sure that the people we put in positions of authority are those who are ready for these positions. Many splits and divisions have come about because the wrong people were put in positions of authority. There are consequences to our actions.

Solomon reminds us, in verse 10, that if the axe is dull, more effort is required to chop the wood. In other words, if you make unwise decisions you will suffer the consequences. A snake that bites its charmer before it is charmed will not be of any profit to the charmer. So it is in life in general. Sometimes we are in such a rush to get on with things, we fail to recognize that our haste will only make matters worse. If you don't take the time to sharpen

the axe, it will take more energy to accomplish the work. If you don't take the time to charm your snake, you risk having it bite you. The wise man will wait for things to be in place. He will make the necessary preparations. He knows that there will be consequences for unwise and hasty decisions.

Only the fool rushes to do things before its time. The wise man will be patient and wait for the Lord's timing. There are consequences to rushing into something too fast.

The Words of the Fool (12-14)

The words we use must be carefully considered. While the words of the wise man are gracious, the words of the fool will ultimately consume him. When the fool speaks, his words begin as folly but end up as "wicked madness." We have all seen how the stories of the fool seem to get bigger and more fanciful as they are repeated. The slight exaggerations develop into outright lies.

The fool may boast of what he will do and accomplish in life, but the reality is that nobody knows what the future will bring. Why boast of your future achievements when you cannot even control what happens today? Our boastful and proud words will ultimately consume us. The fool will be discovered for who he is when he is unable to fulfill his promises. The fool will suffer the consequences of his careless words.

Laziness (15-18)

There will also be consequences for laziness (15-18). The work of the fool wearies him. He does not even know the way to town. Solomon tells us that laziness will lead to

incompetence and further inability. The fool, in his laziness, refuses to put effort into learning anything new. His laziness keeps him from trying out anything new. He remains, therefore, in his ignorance.

This laziness can affect the whole nation. "Woe to the nation whose leaders feast in the morning," says Solomon (verse 16). "Blessed is the nation whose princes eat at the proper time for strength and not for drunkenness" (verse 17). Solomon paints a picture of a nation whose leaders wake up in the morning and ignore their official duties, choosing instead to party and enjoy themselves.

"There is a rich blessing, on the other hand," Solomon says, "when leaders eat at the right time for strength and not for drunkenness and partying." These leaders are not wrapped up in their own pleasures and wealth. They rise up in the morning to serve the people. They eat to be strengthened to serve them better. They are hardworking and disciplined leaders who serve well. The nation that has such a leader will be blessed. The church that has such a leader will be blessed.

Laziness will only lead to the sagging of the rafters and a leaky roof (verse 18). There are consequences of laziness. Laziness will only hurt us in the end.

Verse 19 is somewhat difficult for us to understand. "A feast is made for laughter, wine is to make merry and money is the answer to everything." We know that money is not the answer to everything in life. Solomon makes this clear when he tells us that even his riches left him empty. Could it be that the best way of seeing this verse is to see it in the context of the laziness Solomon is describing in these verses? This is the philosophy of these lazy fools. They live to party. They see money as the answer to

everything. They rise up early in the morning to feast, drink and party. Solomon is simply describing the belief of these lazy leaders who live to party. Woe to the nation who has this sort of leader.

Careful use of Words (verse 20)

We conclude this section in verse 20 with Solomon's reflection on our words and thoughts. His focus in this chapter seems to be on leaders and respect for those leaders. He reminds us that not all leaders are wise. Some leaders are lazy and live for their own pleasures. Despite their foolishness and laziness, we need to be careful about what we say about these leaders. "Don't be quick to speak out against the leaders of your people," Solomon says. "A bird may carry your words to him." Words have a tendency to spread. How many of us have shared something in secret only to find that it reached the ears of the person we spoke against? "Weigh your thoughts carefully," says Solomon. "There will be consequences to what you say."

Solomon's message is quite clear. For everything we do there will be consequences. We need to carefully weigh our words and our actions in light of the consequences they will have in both our lives and the lives of those they will touch.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider the motivations and intentions behind the things you do. Are there any dead flies in your perfume?

- Have you ever made a hasty decision? What were the consequences? Why is it important that we take the time to make our decisions?
- How easy is it for you to speak things we should not speak? What is the result? What does this show us about the importance of being disciplined in the use of our words?
- Have you been diligent in the things God has called you to? What do we learn about laziness in this chapter? What are the consequences of laziness in ministry and service for the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to examine your motives and intentions and reveal any dead flies in your perfume.
- Ask God to make you diligent in your service for Him.
- Ask God to help you to use your words wisely.
- Thank the Lord that even though you have fallen short of His standard, He is willing to forgive you and give you a fresh start.

21

WORK HARD AND GIVE GENEROUSLY

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

In this next section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon gives us some answers to the questions that he has been asking all along. In light of the fact that there are so many unanswered questions and dilemmas in life, how should we live? Here Solomon encourages us to commit ourselves to working hard and giving generously.

Cast your bread on the waters (1)

Solomon begins with a comment about casting our bread on the waters. Some commentators see a reference to the type of trade that took place in the days of Solomon. Much trade took place on the waters. Goods were loaded on ships and taken to distant ports. Sometimes these ships would be gone for prolonged periods of time. When they returned, however, they returned with the profits from their distant travels. Commit your goods to these ships and the profit will one day return to you.

What is Solomon actually saying in real life? He is telling us that the deeds we do and the words we speak will one day return to us. Reach out in love today and that seed of love will one day produce fruit in the life in which it was planted. How many times have we seen this happen? Maybe you taught a Sunday school class years ago. You often wondered if anything you said ever affected those young minds. One day, you meet a former student who tells you of how much that Sunday school class impacted his or her life. You cast your bread on the waters and you waited for God to produce fruit. Paul tells us in Galatians 6:9:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

There is a harvest for those who persevere. Continue to cast your bread on the water. Continue to do good. Do not lose heart in the ministry the Lord has given you. In time, you will see the fruit. The day will come when the ships will return with the profits of your hard work.

Generosity (2-3)

Solomon encouraged generosity. He is telling us that we need to be generous with the things we have. Give to whoever would ask of you. Give to seven people or give even to eight (or even more).

Jesus tells us something similar in Matthew 5:42:

Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

In light of the complexities of life and the problems all around us, we need to be ministering and giving to each other in our needs. The reason for this is because we do not know when disaster will come upon us. This life is uncertain. Disaster could come at any moment. Now is the time to give and be generous. Now is the time to minister. We are to use the resources we have to minister and care for each other. Solomon puts it this way in Proverbs 3:28:

Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"--when you now have it with you.

Today is the day to do good. We may not have anything to give tomorrow. Solomon illustrates this in verse 3. If a cloud is full of rain, it will pour out rain on the earth. That is what the rain in the cloud is for. What good is the rain if it stays in the cloud? It does not refresh the earth. It accomplishes nothing. Many of God's resources are like this. They remain in the clouds but are not poured out on the earth where they can accomplish good. There are many bank accounts that need to be opened up for the sake of the kingdom of God. There are many spiritual gifts that need to be released onto the earth where they will accomplish something for the sake of the kingdom.

Solomon continues illustrating his point by showing us that when a tree falls, it will remain where it falls. No one knows when a tree will fall or even the direction the strong wind will come from that will topple it. Life is uncertain. We do not know when problems will come or where they will come from. In light of the uncertainty of the days, if we have water in our clouds we need to use it to refresh the earth. Maybe tomorrow trials will take away all we have and we will not have any more to give. Tomorrow the tall tree may be toppled by a great wind of trouble. Now is the time to

use the resources the Lord has given us. We may not have them tomorrow.

"If you watch the wind you will not plant," says Solomon in verse 4. If you spend your day sitting around looking at the clouds, you will not harvest your crops. Circumstances are always uncertain. The greedy person will use any excuse possible not to sow his seeds. Today is the day for us to give ourselves to the service of God. Whatever our hands find to do, we are to do with all our strength and might right now.

We do not know the path the wind will take. We do not know how the body of an unborn child is formed in the womb of the mother. Neither do we understand the ways of God, nor how long God has given us to live. Job lived in the comfort and security of his wealth and prosperity. One day, when he was not expecting it, he lost everything. Like the tree toppled in the forest, Job's prosperity and wealth were gone. We cannot afford to live our lives as if we were in control of them. Today maybe all you have left. You may never see tomorrow. Only God knows how much longer you have here on this earth. Don't waste the precious time He has given. Don't waste the resources He has given. Life is too precious to waste.

Solomon challenges us to sow our seeds in the morning and not to be idle in the evening (verse 6). There is much work to be done. We do not know how much time we have. Now is the time to give ourselves to the service of the king.

"Light is sweet," says Solomon (verse 7). The light spoken of here seems to represent the joy and blessings in life. When things are going well we should be happy and content. We should enjoy these moments of joy and blessing. Learn to rejoice in the blessings and give God the glory,

but don't forget the days of darkness (verse 8). How easy it is for us to forget the trials and the lessons learned in those times. The children of Israel were an example of this. God taught them tremendous lessons through the difficulties of life. In the good times, however, when things were going well, all those lessons were forgotten. Dark days are sent to us for a reason. They remind us of the blessing of the light. How often do we take our blessings for granted? We fail to realize that we did not always have such blessings in life. We forget all too quickly what it was like not having the things we have today. "In the good times," says Solomon, "don't forget the dark." Let your understanding of the darkness give you a new appreciation for what the Lord has given you today. Let the lessons in the dark times continue to guide you today in the light of your blessings.

Everything to come is meaningless, Solomon tells us in verse 8. By meaningless he seems to mean "uncertain." We do not know what is to come. We cannot live in the future. All we have is today. It is futile to say, "Tomorrow I will serve the Lord." We don't know if we have a tomorrow. In light of the uncertainties of life, all we are guaranteed is the present. Now is the time to serve. Now is the time to use what God has given for His glory.

Solomon summarizes what he has been telling us in verses 9 and 10. He speaks here to a young man. This is an individual who has his whole life in front of him. This is an individual who has great unexplored and untapped potential. To this man, at the beginning of his life, Solomon says "Be happy and let your heart give you joy all the days of your youth." He calls us to enjoy the blessing that God gives. Rejoice in the goodness of God in this life of uncertainty and confusion.

He tells this young man secondly, that he was to follow the ways of his heart and follow whatever his eyes saw. He was to do this, however, with the understanding that God will bring all things to judgment. "Live life to the full," Solomon advised this young man. "Enjoy the goodness of God. Remember, however, that God will one day demand an accounting."

Solomon also tells this young man to banish anxiety and cast off troubles because youth and vigor were meaningless. Once again we need to understand the word "meaningless" in the sense of "uncertain, unpredictable or fast changing." What Solomon is telling this young man is that he was to enjoy his youth and strength while he had it because his strength and youth would not last. Youth and strength are blessings of God that last for a short time and disappear before we realize it. Again, the idea here is that we are to make the best use of the blessings God has given while we still have them; for we do not know how long they will last.

Because life is uncertain, it should not be wasted. Now is the time to enjoy the blessings of God. Now is the time to use our resources for His kingdom. Now is the time to learn the lessons He wants to teach us. We may not have another day.

For Consideration:

- What lessons has God taught you through the difficult times in life?

- What blessing do you have today? Are you enjoying these blessings? How are you using them for the Lord and His kingdom?
- Are there any blessings that are not being used for the kingdom today? What are they? How would the Lord have you use them for His glory?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the blessings and strength He has given you today?
- Ask God to show you how you can use the resources He has given you for His glory.
- Thank God that though life is uncertain, He is certain and His plan is perfect.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you did not use your blessings and resources for His glory. Ask Him to give you the grace to make your life count today.

REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR

Read Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

In the last meditation, Solomon reminded us of the shortness and uncertainty of life. He challenges us to act now because we have no real guarantee of tomorrow. Here in chapter 12, he continues on a very similar theme. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,” he tells us, “before the days of trouble come” (verse 1).

Youth is fleeting. As much as we would like to stay young and strong forever, it is not possible. Those who have lived a few years know what time and years do to the body and mind. The things we used to find great pleasure in no longer seem to delight us. Our body that was so full of strength and vitality now seems weaker and incapable of doing the things it used to enjoy. While Solomon speaks particularly to the youth in this verse, the principle is applicable to every age.

At each stage in our lives, God blesses us in different ways. When we are young, we have our vitality and energy. As we grow older, we have our children and our

occupations. In later years, God blesses many with grandchildren and friends. The challenge of Solomon here is to open our eyes to the good things the Lord gives us. All of these blessings are temporary. We need to learn to appreciate what God has given for the moment and rejoice in them, giving Him the glory.

In the next few verses, Solomon talks about what happens to the human body over the course of time. He speaks, in verse 2, about the sun and the moon growing dark and the clouds returning after the rain. The capacity for rejoicing can depreciate over time. The older we get, it seems the less adventurous we become and the fewer things we seem to enjoy. Enjoy the Creator now, says Solomon, before the sun's light grows dark in your life. Enjoy Him and His blessings now before the dark clouds of life come when you will no longer find pleasure in them (verse 1).

Not only does time take away our capacity to enjoy the good things of life, it also weakens our bodies. The keepers of the house begin to tremble. It is not certain what the phrase "keepers of the house" refers to but some commentators see a reference to the hands, arms or legs. However we understand the phrase, we can see that the steadiness of youth gives way to the trembling of the body. The once young and strong body now walks and moves slowly; trembling with the effort required to carry out the ordinary tasks of life.

The strong men begin to stoop with age (verse 3). Over time we have seen even the strongest of men begin to stoop as their strength is taken from them.

Notice also the grinders cease because they are few (verse 3). This is an obvious reference to the teeth. Over time and with age the teeth begin to fall out. We are not

able to enjoy the foods we once enjoyed because eating these foods has become too difficult.

Verse 3 also makes reference to failing eyesight. The phrase "those looking through the windows grow dim" may refer to the eyes. Over time, the windows (our eyes) grow dim. We now have trouble seeing the things we used to see.

Solomon tells us in verse 4 that the "doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades." This is possibly a reference to the ears. Again we see the influence of years on the capacity to hear. Over time the "doors to the street" where we communicate and interact with people are closed. No longer can we enjoy the wonderful sounds that fill the air. These individuals rise up in the morning at the time when the birds are singing, but they are no longer able to hear the sounds that they used to enjoy.

The boldness of youth also seems to fade away. In youthful boldness, nothing seemed to cause fear. Now in our declining years, we develop new fears. Now in our old age, we are afraid of heights and the dangers in the streets (verse 5).

The reference to the blossoming of the almond tree in verse 5 may refer to the whitening of the hair. The almond blossom was white. With the graying of the hair comes a slowing down of the body. Solomon compares this to a grasshopper that drags himself along. When we think of the grasshopper we think of a very energetic insect that leaps from one place to another. While this may be the description of youth, the time comes when the body that could leap from one thing to another now can only drag itself to those same places.

Solomon also speaks in verse 5 about the fading desire of old age. The physical appetites and the passions of youth lose their attraction with age. Life becomes more settled and calm. With age also comes death. Solomon reminds us that we will all eventually move on to our eternal home and leave behind mourning family and friends.

In verse 6, Solomon returns to his initial challenge. Understanding the reality of life and the fact that we will not be on this earth forever, now is the time to remember our Creator and enjoy His blessings. I will always remember a dear sister in the Lord who passed away with cancer in a church we had started. I recall standing beside her bed as she suffered the nasty effects of bone cancer. "Wayne," she said to me, "people tell me that they are going to wait until later to accept the Lord and be right with him. They don't understand that when later comes you don't always have the ability to enjoy the Lord." She went on to tell me how she regretted not being able to read the Bible and pray as she wanted because she could no longer focus her mind on the things of God for any length of time. If you are reading this today, heed her warning. Don't wait until later to enjoy the Lord and be right with Him. When later comes, you may not be able to enjoy Him. This is what Solomon is telling us here. He is challenging the youth of his day to get right with God today. Enjoy Him and remember Him while you have the ability to do so. He is challenging all of us to cherish the moment and enjoy what God has given us.

The day is coming for us all when the silver cord of life will be severed. Life's golden bowl, the pitcher of your physical body, will one day be shattered. No longer will your body be able to hold the life giving water it needs. The wheel at the well of life will be broken and no longer supply us with life and energy (verse 6). This is the destiny of all who live

on this earth. Don't wait until this happens to remember the Creator. Now is the time for you to commit yourself to Him. Be reconciled to God today, before the dust of your body returns to the ground (verse 7). We were all created from the dust and we will one day return to the dust. We do not know when God will call us. Seek Him now and enjoy Him while you can.

In the remaining verses, Solomon draws his conclusions. He has been speaking to us about the meaninglessness of life. Life at best is uncertain. Who can understand life with all its complexities, uncertainties and trials? Solomon reminds us, however, that as one who was gifted by God with wisdom, he searched out these things. He reminds us that what he said was upright and true (verse 10). Lest there be a temptation to dismiss this book as the ramblings of a man who was disappointed with life, Solomon reminds us that everything that is written in this book is righteous and true. That is to say, it is from God and inspired by God.

The words of this book and the wisdom contained in it are meant to be "goads" and "nails" to us. The goad was a sharp object that was used by the Shepherd to poke the animal and encourage him in the right direction. The wisdom in this book is meant to move us in the right direction and keep us from danger. This wisdom is also meant to be like nails to us. When something is nailed it is fixed securely in place. The understanding of these words is meant to establish us and provide security in life. We cannot afford to ignore the teaching of this book. It will direct us in the way we need to go and it will establish us in the right path.

Verse 12 gives a warning. We are not to add to the teachings of this book nor are we to take away from its teaching. The wisdom contained in the book of Ecclesiastes is

inspired by God. The wise man will consider what is taught here. We cannot tamper with what has been divinely inspired by God through His servant.

There are many ideas out there in the world. There is no end to the making of books. Ideas were freely circulating even in the days of Solomon. Many people took the time to study and search out the meaning and purpose of life and wearied themselves in the process. Solomon challenges us not to be deceived. What he wrote about life was inspired by God. We can have confidence in what he has to say.

While there may be many ideas circulating through books written by many well intentioned and intelligent people, Solomon tells us that the conclusion to the whole matter is this: "fear God and keep His commandments." To fear God is to respect Him in both our thoughts and actions. It is to honour Him and recognize Him in everything we do. In the confusion of the world, this is ultimately all that matters. We are called on to fear God and honour him in everything we do. He who truly honours and obeys God finds a fulfillment in life that no one else can know. He who fears God does not need to fear the trials that come his way. He who fears God finds security and assurance for this life and the life to come. We were created to enjoy God and meaning in life can only come through fearing and honouring Him. Solomon searched out meaning in everything life had to offer and he testifies to us today that the only thing that satisfied his soul was his relationship with God. Everything else left him empty and barren. This is the whole duty of man - to fear God and honour him in all things (verse 13).

Solomon concludes by reminding us that God will bring everything to light. Nothing can be hidden from Him. This world is filled with unanswered questions. We face trials

and suffering on a daily basis. In time, all this will be brought to light. God knows our hearts. He knows our motives and intentions. He sees us for who we really are. He knows the secrets of our hearts. Nothing is hidden from Him. Everything will be brought to light. Don't wait until it is too late. Now is the time to turn to God. Now is the time to trust His purposes. Now is the time to enjoy Him and the richness of His blessings. To respect, obey and enjoy God, according to Solomon, is what brings meaning and purpose to life.

For Consideration:

- How have you changed over the years? What has time done to you physically and emotionally?
- Are you right with God today? Is there anything you have put off dealing with? Take a moment to make the changes you need to make.
- How much have you been enjoying God and His blessings? What are the good things God has given you in life?
- What is Solomon's conclusion about life and purpose in life? Where can we find meaning and purpose in life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His patience with you. Ask Him to forgive you for not making the best use of your time. Ask Him to give you grace and discipline to use what He has given for His glory.
- Thank God that we can enjoy Him and rejoice in His goodness.

- Take a moment to pray for someone who has not yet come to the Lord. Ask God to touch them and bring them to Himself.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the good things He has given you in this life.
- Thank the Lord that He gives meaning and purpose to life.

PREFACE TO SONG OF SOLOMON

The Song of Solomon is a book that is often ignored. It is, however, a beautiful story about a couple in Israel who share their deep love and passion for each other. It is also a powerful statement about the love of God for us and His desire to enter a deeper intimacy with His people.

It is my prayer that couples who read this commentary on the Song of Solomon would be encouraged by the depth of intimacy and passion God desires for their marriage. I would hope that it would be a challenge to them to awaken love in a new and fresh way.

For all who read this commentary, my desire is that they would hear the call of God to “come away.” That is, to enter a deeper and more intimate relationship with their God.

As you read this book, take the time to see the passion between the couple in the story. Ask yourself what you need to do to experience a deeper love with your husband or wife. Take the time to consider what God is saying to you about your relationship with Him. Ask Him to draw

closer to you so you can know the relationship He longs to have with you.

I trust that this commentary will inspire believers to a deeper intimacy with God. I pray that it will be the means of healing marriages and showing couples the wonderful purity of passion and desire in marriage. May this book be a rich blessing to your walk with God and in your marriage.

INTRODUCTION TO SONG OF SOLOMON

Author

Verse 1 of this book begins with the phrase, “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” This has led many to conclude that the book was written by Solomon. While this is a possibility, the phrase may also refer to the fact that the song was written for him or about him. Solomon’s name is mentioned seven times in the book (1:1; 1:5; 3:7; 3:9; 3:11; 8:11; 8:12). We know that the book is written about Solomon, but there is no clear evidence that he was the author.

Background

The principle difficulty in interpreting the Song of Solomon has to do with knowing who is speaking. The book is a love story written in poetic form. There are a number of characters in this story, including a bride, a groom, and the bride’s friends. While each of these characters speaks in turn, it is not always easy to know who is speaking. For our purposes, we will follow the outline given in the New International Version of the Bible.

The other difficulty we encounter in the interpretation of this book has to do with its purpose. Some see it simply as a love song between two people. Others see it as a sort of parable or allegory about God's relationship with His people. I like to combine both of these. On the first level, the Song of Solomon is a story about the love of a young couple in Israel. We need to understand, however, that marriage is a symbol of our relationship with God. As we study this book we will see what God intends for marriage and also what He intends for our relationship with Him.

Importance of the Book for Today

As we take the time to examine the story of the Song of Solomon, we meet a young couple who have fallen in love. Their love is pure and healthy, and filled with passion and delight. You can't read this book without examining your own marriage. While sometimes quite graphic, this book shows us what true married love ought to be -- a gift from God to be enjoyed and treasured. This book will challenge the reader to work toward this in his or her own marriage.

Song of Solomon also speaks powerfully to our relationship with God. This book shows us the passion and deep desire of God to enter into a relationship with us. All too often we have allowed our relationship with God to become routine and dry. This is not the heart of God for us. He longs for us to experience Him in a deeper and more passionate way. This book will challenge you to examine your own relationship with God.

The Song of Solomon is a book that many believers do not know how to deal with. We don't hear many sermons on this book. In part, this is because of the graphic nature of the book. Sex and intimacy in a committed marriage relationship is not something we need to be ashamed of. This

was God's intention from the beginning. By including this book in the Scriptures, I believe that God is showing us that as the church we need to be ready to address the issues of sexuality in the lives of His people.

23

THE BELOVED'S DESIRE

Read Song of Solomon 1:1-4

While there are various methods of interpreting the Song of Solomon, for our purposes in this commentary, we will follow the general outline of the translators of the New International Version and the New King James Bible who see it to be a love song between Solomon and one of his wives. By extension, however, it is also a symbol of the love of God for His people.

As the curtains open we see a young girl. She is not alone. She is surrounded by friends. These friends are listening as she pours out to them her most intimate feelings about her lover. She is unashamed of her feelings and desires. She is full of emotion and passion as she speaks. The very thought of her lover excites her. Let's listen in on what she is saying.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine" she says (verse 2). Wine, in Bible times, was the drink used in festivities and celebrations. It was a sign of prosperity and blessing. It lifted up

the spirit and caused the heart to rejoice. What our young girl is saying is that while these festivities and celebrations of blessing and bounty were great, they were insignificant when compared to her lover's gentle kisses. All the joys and blessings this world offered were nothing compared to a moment in her lover's arms.

In verse 3, she remembers the smell of her lover's perfume (ointment). She is attracted to his aroma. It was pleasing to her. His name was like this perfume poured out. Names in Bible times reflected the character of the individual. A name was far more than a title given for identification. When this young girl speaks about her lover's name, she is referring to his whole being and character. Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 7:1 that "a good name is better than fine perfume." The young girl admires her lover. She delights in his personality and character. She is attracted to him, not for what she can get from him, but because of who he is.

As she pours out her heart, she realizes that she is not the only one to take such delight in her lover. She looks at her friends and she understands that they too greatly admired him. He was worthy of their admiration. His whole being inspired awe and passion. "No wonder they all love you," she says about her lover (verse 3).

All this talk about her lover stirs up her deepest passion. "Take me away with you," she cries to her lover. "Let us hurry to your chamber" (verse 4). The chamber most often in Scripture refers to a bedroom, but commentators tell us that it may refer to any room where there was privacy. The insinuation here in this verse is obvious. The young girl wants to be alone with her lover. She desires the intimacy of his gentle kisses.

As her friends listen, they support her in her passion for her lover. In verse 4, they tell her that they were happy for her. They agree with her that the love she and her lover had was far greater than wine. Nothing could be compared to the intimacy they experienced. It was one of God's greatest gifts.

The young girl concludes this section by speaking to her lover. "How right they are to adore you" she says. She knew how blessed she was. All her friends adored her lover, yet he belonged to her. This thrilled her heart.

There are several applications we need to make from this passage. Consider for a moment how this young girl unashamedly and passionately speaks of her lover. She does not hesitate to tell everyone what she feels towards him. She speaks with great emotion and pride in her lover. How much does the Lord Jesus mean to you? Could you speak with equal passion about Him? What about your worship of Him? Is it filled with this emotion and passion?

Notice secondly how the kisses of her lover were more desirable than wine and all it represented. How many things do we desire before God in our lives? How important is intimacy with God to you today? Is it more important than anything else in life? What would you give up to be drawn into a deeper relationship with God? What keeps you from intimacy with God? Those who know this intimacy know that there is nothing that can compare.

Finally, verse three tells us that the young girl was attracted to the name of her lover. That name represented his character and personality. What is it about the name of the Lord Jesus that attracts you? Does His personality and character excite you? As you think about Him and His character, do you not find yourself, like this young woman,

desiring to enter into the inner chamber and bow down in worship and adoration?

This section challenges us all to examine our relationship with God. Here before us is a young girl whose passion for her lover has overwhelmed her. There is nothing more important in life to her than being with her lover. This passion causes us to reflect on our relationship with Christ. We bow our heads in shame for we know that we do not have that sort of intimacy with our Saviour. Maybe it's time for us to cast off all obstacles and seek Him with all our hearts.

The challenge of this book is to find a balance between the practical and the spiritual application. We have spoken here about the spiritual application, but the song is written about two lovers who have come to delight in each other. Certainly there is also an application for marriage in this passage. Those of us in a marriage relationship would do well to examine our relationship and see if this passion and delight still remains. This is God's intention for our marriage.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about our relationship with God? What does it teach us about our relationship with our marriage partner?
- How much do you value your relationship with God? Is it "better than wine". In other words, is it more to you than anything this world has to offer? How much do you value your relationship with your spouse?

- What keeps you from enjoying more intimate communion with the Lord? What keeps you from enjoying this relationship with your husband or wife?
- What would the world understand about your relationship with God or your spouse if all they had to go by was how you spoke about them?

For Prayer

- Take a moment to tell the Lord how you feel about Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you a greater passion for Him.
- Maybe you are struggling in your marriage. Ask God to reveal the obstacles that keep you and your partner apart. Ask Him to stir up your love for each other as partners.

GREEN BEDS AND CEDAR BEAMS

Read Song of Solomon 1:5-17

Some time ago I was in a store and I had an opportunity to engage in some small talk with the sales person. "We finally got a nice day," she said. "We sure have," I responded. "It's about time," she said, "We certainly deserve it." I left the store thinking about what she said. Do we really deserve the blessings God gives us? I am not convinced we do, but I am sure thankful that God doesn't always give us what we deserve.

In this section of the Song of Solomon, the young girl is speaking to her friends who have gathered around her. In the previous section, she shared her most intimate thoughts about her lover. Now she focuses on herself. We learn some important details about her in these verses.

First she tells us that she was dark (verse 5). In our day, being dark and tanned is something we admire. In Canada where I am currently living, we have tanning salons to go

to if we feel we need to darken the tone of our skin. In the days of Solomon, however, light skin was the envy of every woman. Light skin was a sign of wealth and blessing. It showed the world that you did not have to work for a living. The young girl appears to be very conscious of her dark skin. Turning to her friends she says: "Do not stare at me because I am dark" (verse 6). She explains, in verse 6, that she was dark in complexion because she had to work in the hot sun tending her family's vineyards. She did not have the luxury of staying home all day. Her brothers forced her to work to help provide for the basic needs of the family. She lived in a humble home.

She went on to say, in verse 6, that while she cared for her family's vineyard, her own vineyard was neglected. She refers to her body. Her skin was being neglected because she had to provide for her family by exposing herself to the heat of the sun. She had no choice in this matter. She compares her skin to the tents of Kedar (verse 5). Commentators believe she is referring to the wandering tribes of this area who lived in tents made of the skin of black goats. The young girl is very aware of her shortcomings.

Notice that despite her shortcomings, she understands that she is a beautiful woman. While she is dark she is still lovely (verse 5). Though she is as dark as the goat skin tents of Kedar, she is also as beautiful as the curtains of Solomon. She may be referring to the beautiful hangings that could be found in the palace of King Solomon. There is a real contrast in this verse. As believers, we constantly live with this contrast. Like this young girl, we know that we are full of sin. On the other hand, however, we have been accepted by the King. His presence in us has made us beautiful. Notice how the young girl does not dwell on her darkened skin. She recognizes her fault but focuses on her beauty. All too many Christians have become trapped into

focusing only on their sin and failures. They fail to move from this to the victory we have in Christ. There is a lesson for us here.

The young girl does not allow her darkened skin to keep her from seeking her lover. "Tell me," she asks him, "where you feed your flocks and where you rest at noon. Why should I be like one of the veiled women" (verse 7)? At noon, the shepherd would look for shade and rest until the heat of the sun had subsided. This was the ideal time for the prostitutes to come by and visit the shepherds. According to Genesis 38:15, we understand that Judah thought his daughter-in-law was a prostitute because she had veiled her face:

When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

The young girl asks her lover to tell her where he grazed his sheep at noon so that she could go directly to him. She did not want to wander from one flock to another like a common prostitute in search of a lover. She was not interested in other men. Her heart was wholly devoted to him alone.

We are not sure who is speaking in verse 8. The New King James Version assumes that it is the voice of her lover. The New International Version, on the other hand, states that it is the voice of the young woman's friends. In either case, she is instructed to take her own flock and follow the footprints of the sheep to where her lover awaited her. There she would enjoy his company at noon.

Her searching is rewarded in verse 9. She sees her lover. As she greets him that afternoon, an exchange of words takes place. Let's listen in to their conversation.

"My darling, my love," he says, "you are like the Pharaoh's mare." Now in our day, that comment would merit a good slap in the face. In this context, however, it would have been a compliment. The greatest horses one could buy in those days were Egyptian horses. You could be sure that the king of Egypt would have the very best of these horses to pull his personal chariot. What the lover is saying is this: You are the very best of the very best. No woman can be compared to you in beauty. He is telling her that he delighted in her more than any other woman.

He goes on to offer her further compliments. "Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels" (verse 10). Notice that she has dressed herself in all her jewels for her lover. She loves him and wants to look her best. Notice, as well, that he notices that she has dressed up for him. (As men we do not always notice such things!) As he admires her beauty, his heart is stirred up to lavish her with even more jewels. "We will make you ornaments of gold studded with silver," he tells her in verse 11. She desires to look her best for him. He desires to bring out her best.

This round of compliments stirs the young girl to respond with her own compliments. "While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance," she told him. She seems to be expressing her desire for her lover. As he sat at his table, her desire for him filled the air like perfume. She compares him to a bundle or sachet of myrrh resting between her breasts. Myrrh was a very costly perfume that could come in either a liquid or solid form. In this case, it is placed in a small bag and worn around the neck on a chain. The fact that this perfume is costly shows how much she treasures her lover. Even as the fragrance of that perfume lingered around her all day and all night, so it was with her thoughts and desires for her lover. She compares

her lover to a cluster of henna in bloom (verse 14). Not only were they beautiful to behold, but offered a sweet fragrance to those who passed by.

Hearing her words, the young man replies: "How beautiful you are, my darling! Your eyes are doves." While we are not completely sure what he means by this statement, it may have something to do with the peacefulness and tenderness she expressed toward him. The dove has long been the symbol of peace.

"How handsome you are, my lover" the young girl replied. "Oh how charming! and our bed verdant (green)" (verse 16). This may be a reference to the fact that she lay there in the arms of her lover in the open field. Their bed was the beautiful green pastures where they lay in the warm noon day sun. The beams and rafters above her were the cedar and fir trees they lay under that day in each other's arms.

Once again we are struck by the love this couple expresses one to another. They are thrilled with each other. All day long they think about each other and desire to be with each other. While she is dark in complexion she is accepted by her lover. She delights in him and thinks about him even when he is not with her. They lavish each other with their compliments and notice the positive traits they each have. As they lay there in each other's arms, everything else seems to fade away.

For Consideration:

- Notice how the lover overlooks the faults in the young girl here. Do you find yourself focusing on

the faults of your spouse? What is the challenge of this passage to you in this regard? How does God treat you?

- Take a moment to list some of the positive characteristics of your spouse. Have you complimented him or her recently? Why do you suppose we tend not to notice these things anymore?
- What is it about God that delights your heart today? Make a list of some of His characteristics.
- Notice that the young girl took the time to make herself beautiful for her lover? How can you do this for your spouse? How can you do this for God?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for your husband or wife.
- Thank the Lord that, despite your shortcomings, He still loves you dearly.
- Do you have trouble loving someone today? Ask God to help you love them despite their faults.
- Ask God to restore joy and passion to your marriage and your personal walk with Him.

DO NOT AWAKEN LOVE

Read Song of Solomon 2:1-7

Interruptions and distractions are things we have to deal with on a daily basis. Whether you are a mother of small children or a business person working on a very important project, these interruptions are very often undesirable and tend to take us away from the task at hand. Even in our relationship with God, there tends to be many such distractions. You can be sure that the enemy will do his best to keep us unfocused and sidetracked. This is the struggle here in chapter 2.

As we begin, the lovers continue to share their feelings about each other. The young girl speaks. "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys," she says (verse 1).

It may be important to note here that the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley were fairly common wild flowers that grew in the fields in that part of the world. This being the case, the young woman recognizes she possesses a certain feminine beauty but also sees herself as being

quite common. She doesn't see herself as standing out in a crowd for her beauty.

In verse 2, her lover, however, compares her to a lily among thorns. Compared to the other women of the nation, in his eyes, she is the most beautiful and attractive of them all. She has captivated his attention. As children of God, we are beautiful because of what Jesus has done in us. We can sometimes focus so much on our sin nature that we fail to see the beauty of Christ in us. This is how the Father chooses to see us.

She, too, feels the same way about him. In verse 3, she compares him to an apple tree in the midst of the forest. Compared to all the men of the kingdom, there is none like him. He stood out in beauty. She is captivated by him. Notice that she delights to sit in the shade of this apple tree and eat its fruit. The shade offers protection and comfort from the hot and scorching heat of the sun. This was what her lover was to her. When she was perplexed and frustrated by the world around her, she could always run to him for shelter and comfort. He would not turn her away. He was always there for her. Psalm 121:5-7 tells us that the Lord also is a shade for those who love Him:

The LORD watches over you—The LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—He will watch over your life;

Never will the Lord forsake us. He is always there when we need him. When frustrated and worried, we can run to the shade of that tree where we can be safe and secure. Has that been your experience with the Lord? Are you a shade for your husband or wife in times of need and struggle?

Notice that the fruit of this apple tree was sweet to her taste. She delights in communion with him. His touch, his words, his love was sweet and pleasant. There are many couples who no longer experience this. The sweetness has gone from their relationships. They no longer delight in each other. Sweetness has given way to bitterness, resentment or duty. Even in our relationship with God this sweetness can be replaced by tradition, obligation, guilt or legalism. There is something beautiful about the relationship our lovers experience here. It is still fresh and sweet. Desire and passion are still very real.

The young woman moves from the imagery of the apple tree and the sweetness of its fruit, to a great banquet table (verse 4). The word "banquet" can be translated by the word "wine." Literally this word means "house of wine." This was the place of joy and festivity. This is what her lover was for her. He was a rich feast of pleasure and joy with delightful fruit of all kinds to enjoy. This common "lily of the valley" now rejoices in the richest of banquets. How unworthy she must have felt yet how richly she was blessed.

She tells us, in verse 4, that he had placed a banner over her. That banner was love. This is not an easy verse to understand. Commentators are divided over its meaning. A banner in Bible times was a rallying point. To place oneself under a banner was to identify with that banner. Those who stood under the banner of a particular king, for example, symbolized their devotion and allegiance to that king. When a king placed his banner over his subjects, he was claiming them as his own. Here we have the lover placing the banner of love over his beloved. By love, he claims her as his own. She has been captivated by his love and is his willing subject.

Notice in verse 5 that the young girl tells us that she is faint or sick with love. Her lover has conquered her. She delights in him. She is lost without him. She calls out for him to strengthen her with raisins and to refresh her with apples. It is important that we note that in verse 4, she compared her lover to a "banqueting table" or "house of wine." Now she asks him, who is her house of wine, to refresh her with raisins. In verse 3, she compares her lover to an apple tree. She calls him now to refresh her with his apples. She is not calling here for physical food. She wants her lover. She wants to be near him. She wants him to touch her. She finds deep satisfaction in his presence, his touch and his words. Only he can satisfy the kind of hunger she feels right now.

As she calls out to her lover, her mind wanders. She finds herself lying in her lover's arms. His left arm is under her head and his right hand embraces her. This is where she longs to be. This is her greatest pleasure and delight. She could stay here for hours. As she considers this she calls out to her friends in verse 7: "Don't awaken love until it so desires."

What does this phrase mean? Let us consider the picture the young girl has painted for us. She is in her lover's arms. He is embracing her. As they lie in each other's arms, they enjoy each other's presence. Maybe they fall asleep. She wants nothing to disturb their love. "Don't awaken us," she says. Keep all distractions from us. This is our time for each other. Don't let his business partners come to wake him and take him from my arms to deal with the pressing matters of the day. May all distractions be gone. Leave us to enjoy each other.

This is a very beautiful love. This couple is captivated by each other. They delight in each other. They long to be

together. They want nothing to distract them in their relationship. There are so many things that distract us in our relationships with our husbands and wives. Even in our relationship with God we find many competitors. Maybe this section of Scripture calls us to re-examine our priorities in life. What is really important? What has come between you and God? What stands now between you and the enjoyment of your husband or wife? The joy and love this couple experiences is something most of us can only dream of experiencing. Maybe it is time we took a look at those things that keep us from experiencing love as God intended.

For Consideration:

- Consider your relationship with your husband or wife. Do you still delight in each other? What keeps you from experiencing this delight? How about your relationship with God?
- In verse 3, the young woman speaks about sitting under the shade of her lover. Are you a "shade" for your husband or wife? Are you someone they can come to for comfort and support what the pressures and stress mount?
- Give some examples of how God is a "shade" for you.

For Prayer:

- Ask God to reveal to you the distractions that have come between you and your husband or wife. Ask Him to reveal the distractions that have come between you and Him.

- Thank God for being a shade in time of trouble. Be specific.
- Ask God to renew your delight in Him and in your husband or wife.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for who He is and for the wonderful things He has done for you.

LITTLE FOXES

Read Song of Solomon 2:8-17

As much as our young lovers wanted to spend all their time together, this was not possible. He was compelled, at times, to be away. During the time he was away, the young girl longed for his return. She constantly watched and listened for any sign of his return. In a very similar way, we too, should be always watching for the return of our Lord and Savior.

The young girl's dreaming about her lover's return is interrupted when she hears him coming from a distance. "Listen! My lover!" she says (verse 8). She rushes to look for him in the distance. He is leaping across the mountains and bounding over the hills. Nothing stands in his way. He seems to be in a hurry. He wants to be with her as much as she wants to be with him? They long to see each other and be in each other's presence.

He comes to her (verse 9) like a gazelle, with great speed and agility. It is early morning. She has not yet gotten out of bed. He comes to her room and peers through the

window. He calls her to wake from her sleep and come with him. There is much beauty around them to enjoy. The rainy winter season has ended. Now the days are warm and sunny. Flowers appear on the surface of the earth, filling it with color and fragrance. This was a season for rejoicing. The songs of the birds could be heard throughout the land. The fig trees were beginning to produce their crop. The grape vines had spread their fragrant aroma throughout the countryside. "Arise, my darling," he calls, "and come with me" (verse 10). He longs to enjoy such beauty with his beloved.

Like the young lover in this chapter, the Lord Jesus calls out to us. He stands outside the door looking in through the window, calling us to come and walk with Him. He calls us to wake from our sleep. Do you hear His voice? What joys will await us as we rise to face the day. This is a day of communion and fellowship with our Creator and Savior. We should arise every morning with this image on our mind.

As if his beloved was hesitant, the young man calls out again. "My dove in the clefts of the rock, show me your face," he says. He speaks here about a type of dove that made its home in the clefts of the rock. It was a very timid bird. Like that dove, his beloved was hidden in her room. "Show me your face let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely," he says (verse 14).

As he awaits her response, the lover calls her attention to the little foxes that had been spoiling the vineyards that were now in bloom. He tells her that it is time for them to deal with this before the vineyards were destroyed (verse 15). What is the young man saying here?

In the land of Israel these little foxes could do much damage to the vineyards. The young man is not particularly speaking of vines, however. He is speaking about their relationship as a couple. He recognized that their relationship was like a vineyard in full bloom. Their relationship was rich, beautiful and rewarding. They enjoyed the fruit of love. He knew, however, that they could not take this relationship for granted. There were many enemies to love. These little foxes had the potential of destroying the beauty of what they had together as a couple.

What are these little foxes today? For each person, they can be something different. Unresolved conflicts, bitterness, lack of forgiveness or insensitivity to the needs of another, could all be like those foxes in our relationships today. These lovers knew that what they had between them was something very special. The young man wanted nothing to spoil the joy they had in each other. What stands between you and your husband or wife today? What stands between you and the Lord? It is always surprising to see the marriage of a couple we respect and admire fall apart. This does not happen overnight. These little foxes have been left unattended in their vineyard. Little by little, they have spoiled the vines. Good relationships do not come naturally. They have to be worked on. The obstacles need to be overcome one at a time. We dare not leave these little foxes unattended.

The young girl now speaks from inside her room: "My lover is mine and I am his," she says in verse 16. She rejoices in the security of their relationship. Yes, there are little foxes that have to be dealt with on a continual basis but their relationship is secure. She is assured of her love for him and his love for her in return.

Notice in verse 16 also that she says that her "lover browses among the lilies." To understand what the young woman is saying here we need to be reminded that in verse 1 she called herself a lily of the valley. In verse 2, her lover spoke of her as a lily among thorns. Could it be that she is speaking of herself. Her lover has come to her and calls her to come to his side. She knew he delighted to be with her, the lily of the valley. The Hebrew word translated "browse" in the NIV is used in the context of tending, feeding or grazing ones sheep. Her presence refreshed her lover like the sheep feeding in the luscious green pastures of Israel. The picture is one of her lover walking among the beautiful lilies. As he walks, he takes in the beauty and the smell of these flowers. The sights and smells delight him. This is what the young woman was like for her lover. He delighted in looking at her and smelling her perfume. He delighted in her.

This section is concluded by the words of the young girl speaking to her lover. "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn my lover and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills" (verse 17). In verse 16 she told us that he grazed among the lilies. Here she tells us that he does so until the day broke and the shadows fled. Maybe they spent the night together in each other's embrace. They enjoyed each other until the next day when he had to again leave to pasture his sheep in the rugged hills.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the desire of the Lord for His bride, the church?
- What are the "little foxes" that have to be dealt with in your relationship with your husband or wife?
- What are the "little foxes" in your relationship with God?
- Notice in this passage how the young girl longs for her lover to come to her. How much do you experience this in your relationship with the Lord? Do you long for his return?
- This passage speaks of the communion between the lover and his bride. Compare what you see here to your relationship with God? Compare this passage with your relationship to your husband or wife. Are there things that need to be improved? What in particular needs work?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to expose the "little foxes" in your relationship with Him and with your husband or wife.
- Ask God to draw you closer and give you a greater passion for Him.
- Ask God to help you and your husband or wife to be an example of the kind of relationship He wants with His people.

LOST AND FOUND

Read Song of Solomon 3:1-5

Have you ever had one of those times when it seemed that the Lord was very distant? It seemed that your prayers did not reach His ears. The joy of our salvation seems to disappear under the stresses and turmoil we experience. Like Jesus on the cross, we cry out "why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). We long for His presence, but He just doesn't seem to be there. This is what is happening to the young woman in this section.

As we begin, night has fallen. She has gone to bed. As she lies in her bed, her mind wanders to her lover. She wanted him to be with her that night. She looked for him but she couldn't find him. How many times has this been your experience with the Lord? Have you ever cried out with all your heart for Him to make His presence known to you? Deep in her heart there was an aching void. She was not complete without him.

Her need was so powerful that she rose from her bed and went out into the streets to find him. How much do you long

for the Lord and a deeper walk with him? Do you long for him enough that you would leave your comfort to find Him? It is one thing to say that we want to know the Lord in a deeper way. It is quite another to do something about it. The measure of our desire for the Lord can be found in what we are willing to give up in order to know Him better. Do you love him enough to get out of bed in the morning to spend time seeking Him in prayer and study of His word? Do you love Him enough to give up something else in order to spend in His presence? The young woman is willing to leave the warmth and comfort of her home to go out into the cold and dark night to seek her lover.

How many of us have looked out into the darkness around us and said: "When things get brighter I'll seek Him. The young woman could have said: "He knows where I live, when he wants to be with me he will come to me." This was not her response. She refused to let any more time pass. She cared nothing about what others might think of her roaming the streets in the middle of the night. Her eyes were not on what others thought but on her lover. She wanted to be with him at all costs. The cold and darkness were no obstacles. How we need to have this attitude when it comes to the Lord. Let no more time pass. Let nothing stand in your way. Leave the comfort and warmth of your cozy bed and seek His face.

As she moves out into the dark streets of the city at night, she met the watchmen on their duty. She asks them if they have seen her lover. Soon after passing by the watchmen, she found her lover. Her seeking was rewarded. The Lord says in Jeremiah 29:13:

You will seek me and find me when you seek me
with all your heart.

When she saw her lover, she ran to him and held on to him with all her might. She would not let him go until she had brought him to her mother's house. There she would enjoy his loving embrace.

This section concludes with a repetition of the phrase we have seen in Song of Solomon 2:7. Here once again as she lies by her lover's side, she commands her friends not to stir or awaken them. As in chapter two, she wants nothing to disturb their love. She had sought him and found him. Now she wants nothing to come between them. She does not want to be separated from him.

Here in this section is the story of a young woman who refused to let comfort ruin her relationship with her lover. She was willing to put the effort into her relationship. Her efforts were rewarded. How many times have we settled for things the way they were? We become comfortable and lazy in our relationships. What this passage teaches us is that relationships take effort. Show me a couple who does not work hard on making their marriage better and I will show you a couple whose relationship will soon go stale. Show me someone who does not discipline himself to spend time with his Lord and I will show you someone whose relationship with the Lord is deteriorating. How much are you willing to put into your relationships?

For Consideration:

- How much do you feel the need of a closer walk with the Lord? Does your heart cry out for Him like this young girl's heart cried out for her lover?

- What are you willing to do to foster a greater relationship between you and your husband or wife? Take a moment to consider what you could do to improve your relationship.
- Have you become comfortable in your relationship with God and with your husband or wife? Why is it so easy to accept a mediocre relationship? What do you think is God's desire for our relationships?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to increase your love and desire for Him.
- Take a moment to pray about your relationship with your husband or wife. Ask God to draw you closer to each other.
- Ask God to give you a willingness to drop anything that would keep you from a deeper relationship with Him or with your spouse.

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

Read Song of Solomon 3:6-11

If there is one thing we will never understand, it is the love of God for us. We can bask in the glory and protection of this love. We can soak up and delight in its rays. We can experience it in the deepest trials and struggles of life but we will never be able to understand what it is that causes a holy God to reach out in love to sinners like you and me.

As we continue this love story, the young girl speaks. She has been gazing out into the desert. The desert is a barren place. It is a place of death, dryness and isolation. As she looks into the desert, however, her eyes light up. A smile comes to her face. There in the desert, she sees her lover coming toward her. Notice how she describes his coming. He comes like a pillar of smoke perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, the work of a great merchant. What is she saying here? Myrrh and frankincense were used as perfumes in the days of Solomon. You may recall in Song of Solomon 1:13 that it was worn on a chain around the neck. It had a delightful aroma. Could she be telling us that her lover's arrival was like the pleasant aroma of frankincense

and myrrh billowing up like a cloud, delighting her senses? On the first level this seems to be what she is saying.

There are a couple of very important comparisons we need to make here. It should be noted that the Lord Jesus came into the desert of this world too. As king and Lord of all, He left his home in heaven to come to this earth for you and me. When He came, wise men brought gifts of frankincense and myrrh. Out of the desert of this world came one who is beautiful beyond all others. Out of the desert of this world came the Savior of our souls. Like the young girl, our heart leaps for joy as we consider that He comes for us.

As the young woman strains her eyes to see her lover coming toward her, she notices how glorious and majestic he is. His carriage is escorted by sixty warriors. These men represent the greatest warriors of the nation. They hold their swords and carry their spears at their side. They are skilled warriors ready for battle. The sight is awe inspiring.

Our attention shifts to the carriage. It was made from the finest wood of Lebanon. No expense was spared in the construction of this carriage. It was made to carry a great king. Its posts were silver. Its base was made from gold. The inside was upholstered with love by the women of Israel (verse 10).

How different was the coming of our Lord. He did not come in a luxurious coach escorted by soldiers. Instead, He came seated on a donkey, surrounded by fishermen and tax collectors. His coming was very humble compared to the arrival of Solomon in this passage. His second coming, however, will be in great splendour.

As the young woman considers the scene before her, she calls the women of the city to come to see the king. She is

proud of him. She wants everyone to notice him. Notice in particular what she wants them to see. She focuses their attention on the crown his mother gave him on his wedding day. This is not to be confused with his royal crown. This is a crown worn by the groom on his wedding day. Sometimes these crowns were made of flowers. They were often quite simple. The king wears this crown with great joy.

The Lord Jesus also wore a crown on his head. This crown was as well a symbol of his marriage to his bride. That crown was not his kingly crown. It was a crown of thorns. He wore it with great joy and delight. He wore it as a symbol of his love for us. Should this not be the focus of our attention as well? We will never understand why he wore that crown for us, but He did. It is our joy and glory today. We rejoice in that crown. We love Him because he wore it.

The young woman delights in her lover's crown. It is a symbol of his love for her. She boasts in his love for her. She delights in him. Do you remember the day you came to know the Lord? Do you still delight to be in His presence? What is true of our relationship with the Lord ought also to be true in our marriages as well. Do we delight in the love of our marriage partner?

For Consideration:

- Can you remember the day you came to know the forgiveness of your sin? What was that day like for you? Have you lost something of that joy over the years?

- Can you remember the love you felt for your spouse in the early days of your courtship? What has happened to that love over the years?
- Consider what the Lord Jesus did for your salvation? What ought to be our response to this sort of love?
- What can you do to refresh the love in your marriage?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to renew your love for Him.
- Ask God to help you see the obstacles that have blocked you in your relationship with Him.
- Take a moment to praise Him for His unconditional love. Thank Him that He came to the desert of this world out of pure love for you.
- Ask the Lord to show you how you can stir up delight in your marriage.

29

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL

Read Song of Solomon 4:1-7

Isn't it wonderful to know that despite our past failures and sin, we can be completely forgiven and accepted? When God forgives us, He sees us as though we had never sinned. We can be pure and spotless before Him because of the blood of Christ which cleanses us. There are times when we can focus so much on our sins and shortcomings that we fail to see that God, through Christ, no longer holds those sins against us. In His eyes, I am a beautiful bride clothed in the righteousness of His Son. In this section, the young man tells his bride what he feels about her. Let's examine his description of here.

"How beautiful you are," he tells her in verse 1. This is something we need to understand in our own day. God looks at us with all our warts and bruises and sees us as beautiful. We know who we really are. He knows we are sinners, but He has dealt with that problem through the Lord Jesus Christ. He now looks at us and sees the Lord Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans 8:1:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

All our sins and imperfections have been covered by the blood of Christ. If you are covered in His righteousness, you are beautiful in the eyes of the Father.

The young man's statement is not empty flattery. He goes on to tell her, in particular, what he finds beautiful about her. He begins by speaking about her eyes. He describes them as the eyes of doves. The dove was a very timid bird. It has been long been a symbol of innocence and peace. This is what the groom sees as he looks into the eyes of his bride. He sees innocence, tenderness and peace. They were very pleasant eyes. We have all met people whose eyes seem to penetrate and cause us fear or uneasiness. This was not the case here. Anyone looking into the eyes of this bride felt peace. The eyes tell a lot about a person. These eyes spoke of tenderness, compassion and innocence.

Notice that these eyes are behind a veil. Some commentators tell us that the veil was worn usually for special occasions. One of those occasions was a marriage. We have seen, in chapter 3:11, that the groom is wearing his wedding crown. Could it be that the bride is wearing her wedding veil here? If this is the case, the groom is seeing his bride on their wedding day.

The groom compares his bride's hair to a flock of goats going down from Mount Gilead. The goats mentioned here most likely had long dark wavy hair. Can you picture these goats coming down the mountainside? It is a beautiful sight to see. The whole mountain comes alive with the long black wavy hair of the goats bouncing up and down as they descend the slopes. There is bounce and life in this hair.

He speaks next about her teeth. He compares them to a flock of shorn sheep after washing. The white wool of a sheep would get quite dirty and matted in the open fields where they pastured. These sheep, however, have been freshly sheared and washed. All the dirt has been removed. They are now a beautiful white. This is what the groom sees when he looks at his bride's teeth. They are white and beautiful. Notice as well that he tells us that each of these teeth has its twin with none alone. In other words, her teeth are perfectly matched and of equal size. There is none missing. Her lips were like a stand of scarlet ribbon, brightly colored and attractive. Her whole mouth was lovely with her scarlet lips and pure white teeth. She had a perfect smile.

Her temples behind her veil are compared to a piece of pomegranate. This fruit when cut open has a beautiful red texture. Her skin had this beautiful texture to it. She did not look too dark or too pale, but was full of health and color.

The groom, because of his military experience, compares her neck to the tower of David. On this tower, commentators tell us, were hung the weapons and arms of enemy soldiers. For a soldier and king, this was a beautiful sight to see. The elegant tower, beautifully constructed was decorated with weapons like jewelry. The groom looks at the jewelry hanging from his beloved's elegant neck. Like the tower of David, her neck was adorned with jewelry. It suited her perfectly. It was a beautiful sight to see.

Her breasts are compared to two young fawns feeding among the lilies. Notice here that he speaks of fawns, the young of the gazelle. This is a picture of youth and innocence. These fawns are feeding in a carefree way among the lilies.

His description ended, the groom says that he will go now to the mountains of myrrh and the hills of frankincense until the day breaks. What is he saying here? The remainder of the chapter indicates that he is calling his bride to come away with him to the mountains. The mountains of the Bible are often seen as places where one would get away for deeper communion with God. We see this in the case of Moses and Jesus. Could it be that he wants to be with her. Notice in chapter 3 verse 6, that the groom comes to his bride from the desert in a pillar of smoke perfumed with myrrh and frankincense. The context indicates that a wedding is taking place. The groom is wearing his wedding crown (3:11) and the bride is wearing her wedding veil (4:1). The groom has come to his bride and now he is taking her away with him to be his (4:6).

Notice how the groom notices no fault in his bride at all. "There is no spot in you," he says (verse 7). In his eyes, she is perfect. This is how God sees us in Christ. As Paul tells us, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1).

If you are a husband or wife today, how would you describe your partner? Do you see the beauty of your husband or wife? Do you see the qualities that God has given them that make them special? Compliments have always been difficult for me to receive and give. Sometimes, however, it is necessary that we tell our partner what it is that attracts us to them. What a blessing it is to know that we have value in another person's eyes. The bride and groom of this chapter encourage each other deeply by sharing their love and delight in each other by their words.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to list the positive characteristics of your spouse. Maybe you could find the time to tell him/her what you really like about them.
- Compare how God feels about us with how we often see each other. Why are we so slow at forgiving and putting aside differences?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for how He sees you in Christ.
- If you are married, thank the Lord for the positive characteristics you see in your spouse.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to see others as He sees them in Christ

DRINK YOUR FILL, O LOVERS

Read Song of Solomon 4:8-5:1

All too often we become content with mediocrity. Whether it is in our relationship with the Lord or with our spouse, we often reach a certain level and never progress beyond that level. Is this how it ought to be? Do you really believe that you have gotten as far as you can in your relationship with God? Is there any hope for improvement in your marriage? This section is a challenge to us to strive toward greater intimacy.

We begin in verse eight with the lover calling his beloved to come with him. He invites her to depart with him from the mountains where the lions and the leopards roamed. He invites her to fellowship and intimacy with him.

Notice in verse 9 that Solomon was captivated by his bride. "You have stolen my heart," he tells her. Just one glance from her eyes filled his heart with longing and passion. Just one jewel from her necklace made his heart beat excitedly.

He was captivated by her love. This ought to be the experience of every couple. Solomon encourages husbands to be captivated by the love of their wives in Proverbs 5:19:

A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

This is also how the Lord God feels toward us. He loves us with a deep and passionate love so strong that He willingly allowed His Son to die on our behalf.

For Solomon, the love of his bride was better than wine. Wine was a symbol of rejoicing and prosperity. He is telling his bride that her love was greater than all the prosperity and rejoicing he could ever have in life. Far better was her love than all the riches and prosperity this world could give.

He delighted in her perfume. There was no smell like the smell of her perfume. No spices could compare to its aroma. It filled him with delight. It drew him to her. This is what her perfume was designed to do. This is why she wore it.

"Your lips," he told her, "drip sweetness as the honeycomb. Milk and honey are under your tongue." Commentators are divided over the meaning of this phrase. Some see here a reference to her speech. Her words were wholesome and added to her already beautiful character. Others see a reference to the lover delighting in the kisses of his beloved. They believe him to be saying: "Your kisses are as sweet as honey."

While the groom is thrilled with his bride, notice how he compares her to a locked up garden, an enclosed spring

and a sealed fountain (verse 12). The garden is a picture of beauty and perfume. The spring and the fountain are places of refreshing and renewal. This is what his beloved was to him. She brought refreshing and beauty into his life. When he was with her, he was surrounded by beauty. She revived and invigorated him like a spring of fresh water to a weary traveler. Notice, however, that as a garden she was locked up. No one had access to this garden but him who had the key. All this beauty and refreshing was for her lover alone. He alone had the key to her heart. He alone could come into the garden and enjoy her beauty. As her lover's garden, what a delight she was. She was filled with the finest and most wonderful fruit and spices (verses 13-14). What a privilege it was to have her all to himself. How it must have thrilled his heart to know that she was his and his alone.

The feeling between these two lovers is mutual. While he delighted in her beauty and charm, she calls upon the north and south wind to blow through her garden (her own body) and to send her fragrant perfume abroad. Why does she call the wind to send her perfume abroad? Her interest is in attracting her loving husband. "Let my lover come into my garden and taste my choice fruit," she cries. Her desire is for her husband. She wants to be with him. She wants to attract him. There is intimacy and passion here in her words.

Her husband responds to her invitation and comes to her (5:1). He is surrounded by her perfume. He gathered his myrrh. In chapter 1 verse 13, she wore a sachet of myrrh between her breasts. He eats from his honeycomb. In verse 11, her lips are compared to the honeycomb. He drinks his milk. Milk was under her tongue in verse 11. There is deep intimacy between them as they enjoy each other.

This section is concluded with the phrase, "Eat O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers." The NKJV translation attributes this statement to the groom who speaks to his friends, encouraging them to delight in their wives. The NIV, on the other hand, attributes these words to the friends of this couple who challenge this newly married couple to drink their fill of this wonderful love they were experiencing.

This phrase: "Drink your fill, O lovers," is very important. It challenges us never to be happy with mediocrity in our marriages. It reminds us that we should never be embarrassed to love our spouses or our God with passion and delight. This is how God designed these relationships. Are you drinking your fill in your relationship with your partner? Are you being satisfied fully in his or her love? What about your relationship with God? Are you being filled to overflowing in your relationship with Him? Are you still longing for more? Drink your fill. This passage tells me that a thirst and hunger for a deeper relationship with God or our spouses is God's desire for us. May God grant that we experience what this couple experienced in their relationship with each other.

For Consideration:

- What hinders us from being captivated by the love of our partners? What holds us back in our relationship with God? Be specific.
- Take a moment to consider your relationship with God, your husband or your wife. What challenge does this passage bring?

- The desire of the bride is to be attractive to her lover. What do you need to work on in your life that would make you more attractive to your spouse? Don't think only of physical appearance in your answer. What changes could you make that would bless your spouse?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to reveal to you the obstacles that block you in your relationship with your partner and with God himself.
- Ask God to renew your marriage. Ask Him to refresh your relationship with Him.
- Take a moment to thank Him for your spouse and for the delight he or she is to you.

31

DIRTY FEET AND A BROKEN HEART

Read Song of Solomon 5:2-16

No relationship is perfect. Over the last few meditations, we have been examining the relationship between the lover and his beloved. Their relationship has been a real encouragement and challenge to us. We have marveled at their love for each other. As a couple, however, they do not seem real. Everything seems to be far too perfect. Chapter 5 brings them down to our level. We see that they too have their moments of disagreement. They, too, make mistakes and need to be reconciled.

It is now night time. The young wife is in bed. Her lover is not with her. She is asleep but her heart is awake. Could it be that she is waiting for him to return? Is her heart grieving over his absence? As she sleeps a knock comes to the door. She awakens to the sound of her lover calling out to her to open and let him in. Notice the love in his voice. He calls her his dove, his love, his perfect or flawless one.

As he waits for her, there is a tone of urgency in his voice. His head is drenched with dew and he is damp from the night. This would indicate that he has been out all day. He left when the dew was still on the ground and now he was damp from the night air. He is standing at the door, cold, tired and wet, waiting for her to open it. May be has stood there all day waiting for her to open.

The young bride was comfortable in her warm bed. She had taken her coat off and was snuggled up under her blankets. She had also washed her feet from the dust and dirt of the day. She heard her lover's call. She loves him, but she does not want to get out of her comfortable bed. Having just washed her feet, she did not want to get them dirty on the floor. She expressed her unwillingness to get out of bed to open the door. How many times have we been in similar situations in our lives as couples? Maybe your husband or wife needed you, but you were unwilling to make a personal sacrifice to help. In our relationship with the Lord the same principle applies. He calls us to leave the comfort and security of our beds to open to him but we hesitate. He calls us to be willing to get our feet dirty in service but we don't want to.

Notice how her lover does not argue with her. He does not force her to get out of bed. Instead, he put his hand through the door latch and leaves (verse 5).

The young bride came to realize what she had done. Her heart began to beat for her husband again. She got out of bed, dirtied her feet and went to open the door for him, but it was too late. Notice in verse 5 that when she opened the door, her hands dripped with myrrh on the handles of the lock. Where did this myrrh come from? There are a variety of possible answers. Maybe, realizing what she had done, she anointed herself with this lovely perfume as a sort of

peace offering for her husband. Verse 4 tells us that he had “thrust his hand through the latch-opening.” It may also be that he had hung a sachet of this perfume on the door for her as a gift.

She now stood at that door with dirty feet and a broken heart. She recognized the error of her ways. She called out to him, but there was no answer. Her unwillingness to sacrifice her own comfort had driven him away. In the end, it had cost her dearly.

Knowing that something had to be done, she put on her cloak and went out into the dark damp night in search of her lover. As she roamed the streets in search of the one she loved, the night watchmen found her. They were suspicious and beat her. Maybe they thought she was a prostitute. What other type of woman would walk the streets at this time of night smelling like myrrh? They stripped her of her cloak. She stood on the street, half-naked, cold and bruised and very lonely. You can be sure that on top of this, she bore the guilt of what she had just done to her lover. It all happened because she had been unwilling to sacrifice her own comfort for him. Now she was paying the price.

There is a very important lesson in this for us. Our unwillingness to serve others at our own expense will ultimately cost us dearly. How many husbands or wives have been driven away because of the unwillingness of a partner to sacrifice their own personal interests? How many churches have died because of a membership that was unwilling to dirty their feet for the sake of the needy people in their community? How many believers have driven the presence of God from their lives because of their pursuit of personal interests and pleasures? Sacrifice is not an option; it is a necessity in every relationship.

In her despair, the bride called out to her friends: "If you see my lover," tell him that "I am faint with love" (verse 8). If there was one thing that this situation had taught her, it was how important her lover was to her. She missed him. She needed him.

Hearing her pleas, the bride's friends ask her what was so special about her lover that she would feel this way (verse 9). Why was he any different from the other men of the city? She is quick to tell them what made him so special.

In verses 10 to 16, she explained to her friends what it was about her husband that made him so special. Compared to other men, he was the chief among ten thousand. In other words, only one in ten thousand could compare to him.

He was radiant and ruddy (verse 10). He was the picture of health and life. His hair was black like the color of a raven (verse 11). His head was of the finest gold (11). This is a picture of nobility. His eyes are compared to doves washed in milk perfectly set in his head like jewels (verse 12). The dove is white in color. The fact that this dove was washed in milk make him even a purer white. His cheeks were like beds of spice (verse 13). This may indicate that he had anointed his beard with fragrant perfume? His lips were like lilies dripping with myrrh. The lilies referred to here were very likely red in color. She was drawn to the sweetness of his lips as one was drawn to perfume. His arms were like rods of gold (verse 14) set with chrysolite. The fact that his arms are compared to rods is an indication of their strength. His arms were dressed with fine jewelry. The rest of his body was like polished ivory decorated with sapphires (verse 14). Ivory was white. White skin indicated wealth and prosperity. The person with white skin did not have to work in the hot sun for a living. His body

had perfect shape and form. His legs were pillars of marble (verse 15). Here we see a symbol of strength. Notice how his legs were set on bases of fine gold (verse 15). Either this refers to some type of footwear or to his nobility. Notice that his head and his feet are gold. He is noble from his head to his feet. His general appearance was like a choice cedar tree (verse 15). He was tall and strong. His mouth was sweet (verse 16). She sums up what she has been saying in these simple words: "He is altogether lovely."

Notice in verse 16 that she sees him not only as her lover but also her friend. This is what we should be to our partners. There are relationships where only one of these is true. In any healthy marriage, we are both lovers and friends.

We see here that while she had been guilty of turning her lover away, she still loved him deeply. Through this time, she has come to a new appreciation of just how much he means to her. She has recognized her error and now she is doing everything in her power to make things right and restore their relationship. This has cost her much. She has gotten her feet dirty, she has been beaten by the guards, she has been stripped of her coat and humiliated but she will not stop seeking reconciliation. How much will you pay to be restored?

For Consideration:

- Have you ever experienced the loss or near loss of someone? How did this help you appreciate them even more?

- Who loses in the end when the bride is unwilling to make an effort to reach out to her husband? What is the application of this to your marriage?
- Have you ever found yourself wandering from the Lord and living for yourself? Is it more difficult to wander than to live in obedience? How does this chapter illustrate this point?
- What makes your spouse special to you? Take the time to list some of his or her special characteristics.

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for your husband or wife.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you were not willing to make the extra effort for your loved one.
- Ask God to give you a greater appreciation for your spouse. Ask him to give you a greater appreciation for what God has done for you.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for who He is for you.

RECONCILIATION

Read Song of Solomon 6:1-12

While no relationship is perfect, the one thing about true love is that there is always forgiveness. The young bride and her groom had been apart. When he came to see her she was unwilling to get out of bed to open the door for him. Because she did not open the door, he left. Realizing what she had done, she left her bed, put on her cloak and went out into the night in search of her lover.

As we begin chapter 6, the bride's friends recognize her pain. In the previous chapter, we left her standing in the cold night air beaten and stripped of her cloak. Physically and emotionally, she was struggling. She needed her friends to stand with her. How important it is to have friends in our time of need. Notice how her friends wanted to do everything they could to help her find her lover. They had seen something of the wonderful relationship she had with her lover and there was something quite attractive about this. They appear to envy this relationship. Does the unbelieving world envy the relationship you have with the Lord Jesus?

Her friends ask her where her lover had gone so they could look for him with her. She tells them that he had gone to his garden, to the beds of spice to feed his flock and gather lilies. This verse causes a certain amount of difficulty. In Song of Solomon 5:8, it is very evident that the bride does not know the whereabouts of her lover. Now she is not only telling her friends where he is but also what he is doing. How does she know this? Why would she be looking all over the place for him if she already knew where he was? This has caused many commentators to see a hidden meaning in these verses.

We have already seen that her lover has compared her to a garden on two separate occasions (see 4:12 and 5:1). Could it be that the garden referred to here is not a physical garden but the bride herself? Is she reflecting on the intimacy they enjoyed as a couple? She speaks about her lover feeding his flocks among the lilies (verses 2-3). Her lover had compared her breasts to twin fawns feeding among the lilies (4:5). It is interesting to note that thinking about this, causes the bride to make the statement: "I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies" (verse 3). If she were simply speaking here about her lover going out to feed the sheep, why would she be drawn to this conclusion? It appears that these verses speak about the oneness they enjoyed in their intimacy as a couple? Could it be that they have now found each other and she holds him close to her breast?

It is clear from verse 4 that she is now with her lover. Notice that despite what she has done to him, he still loves her deeply. When he sees her, he tells her what he thinks of her. She is as beautiful as Tirzah, a town known for its beautiful gardens and groves. She is as lovely as the beautiful and majestic city of Jerusalem. He compares her to an awesome army with banners. To a king, an army

parading itself with its banners was an awesome sight. If you lived in those days and saw the army of the great king Solomon decked in their finest uniforms parading down the street with their banners lifted high, you would stop everything you were doing to take a look. This great army would inspire you with awe and nationalistic pride. So it was with his lover. When he saw her he was taken back in awe and pride. He was proud to call her his. She inspires in him so much awe that he asked her to take her eyes from him because they overcome him (verse 5). He compared her hair to a flock of goats freshly washed going down the mountain of Gilead (verse 5). These goats very likely had long black hair.

In verse 6, her teeth are compared to a flock of sheep freshly washed each with its twin. These sheep were white in color. Like these freshly washed sheep, her teeth are clean and fresh. The fact that each one has a twin shows us that her teeth are even and straight. There was none barren among them. In other words, none of her teeth were missing.

The groom also noticed her temples and compared them to pomegranates (verse 7). The pomegranates were reddish in color on the inside. She was full of color, healthy and vibrant.

While her husband, the king, had many queens and concubines, she was the perfect one (verse 9). She delighted his heart above all others. She was her mother's favorite. The women of the nation called her blessed. The rest of the queens and the concubines of the king's court praised her. She was the envy of everyone.

Her lover compared her to the morning in verse 10. Like the dawn, she brought light and warmth. She was as fair

as the moon. She shone like the moon in the midst of darkness. She was as radiant and warm as the sun itself. Her beauty and radiance inspired everyone who saw her.

Remember that this was the same lady who had left him out in the cold (see 5:2-3). What she had done to him did not change his feelings towards her. It is the same way in our relationship with the Lord. Our sins will not change His love for us.

Verses 11 and 12 are not easy to understand. The New King James Version and the English Standard Version attribute them to the bride. The New International Version, on the other hand, believes it is the groom who speaks. It is difficult to know who is speaking in these verses. Either of these suggestions is a possibility.

Notice what the speaker says in verse 11-12:

I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people.

If the speaker in verse 11-12 is the groom, he may simply be saying that he had gone down to look over his property. As he looked over the growth and beauty of the valley, his mind wandered. Notice that his “desire” set (or cast) him among the royal chariots. His last meeting with his bride had not been pleasant. She had left him standing in the cold. Verse 12 seems to tell us that he went to the valley to see the vines and pomegranates. Before he realized it, however, his desire for his bride had overcome him. This desire for her swept him off his feet and took him back to her like a speeding chariot? He could not remain angry

with her. He loved her too much for that. True love is stronger than anger and frustration. Where there is true love, reconciliation is always possible.

For Consideration:

- Are their things in your relationship with your spouse you need to forgive? What are they?
- Have you experienced unconditional love in your marriage? Give an example.
- What does this passage teach us about the love of God for us?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for his unconditional love.
- Ask God to help you to deal with the issues that separate you in your relationship with someone you love.
- Ask God to help you like this couple never to allow minor differences to stand between you and those you love.

RESTORED AND REASSURED

Read Song of Solomon 6:13-7:13

You will recall that the lovers have been dealing with a problem between them. She had refused to allow her husband into her room, leaving him in the cold and dark. Recognizing the error of her ways, she went looking for him. They have now found each other. Her husband received her with open arms, reassuring her of his undying love. .

A call goes out in verse 13: "Return, return, that we may look upon you." Who is calling out? Perhaps it is the bride's friends; perhaps the queens and concubines (verse 9). The fact that they ask her to return is an indication that she does not want to return. We are not told the reason for this. What is clear, here, however is that in our lives as believers we will be similarly tempted. The call of the old life is very real and we will experience its call on many occasions in our walk with the Lord.

Notice the response of the groom to the cries of her friends (verse 13). "Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte as on the dance of Mahanaim" (NIV)? We know very little about

this dance. Obviously it was a popular dance and attracted multitudes of people. Solomon asks why her friends would treat her as some form of entertainment and only delight in her for her beauty. He saw this as demeaning to her and who she really was.

Her lover seemed to know just how to lift her spirits. He spoke up. "You are beautiful," he told her. He didn't leave it at that; He goes on to tell her particularly what he found beautiful about her, from her feet right up to the top of her head. She must have been a very beautiful woman. In chapter 7:1 he uses the words beautiful, graceful, jewels and "work of an artist" to describe her feet and thighs. He spared no words in describing her beauty. Her navel and waist are seen as bowels and mounds of wheat encircled with lilies. (7:2). The picture is one of fruitfulness and delight. He describes her breasts in verse 3 to be like twin fawns of a gazelle. The focus here is on the fact that these are the fawns of a gazelle, youthful and innocent. Her neck was as impressive as a tower made of ivory and her eyes were like clear pools of water reflecting the light (7:4). Her nose is compared to the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus (7:4). It is clear that this is intended to compliment her beauty and so it may be a reference to a beautiful tower that stood out in the landscape and attracted the admiration of passersby. Solomon tells his bride that her head crowns her like Mount Carmel and that her hair was like a beautiful royal tapestry that completely captivated his attention. Just speaking about her, thrilled his heart (verse 6).

While in Song of Solomon 6:13 the king tells his bride's friends that he was not interested in everyone being entertained by her beauty, he himself is deeply captivated by her. What we see here is a man who wants this beauty for himself. Isn't this what it is like in our relationship with the

Lord God? He is not interested in sharing us with others. He wants us for himself alone.

In verses 7-8, we see that Solomon's desire is not just to stand by and admire his bride. He wants to touch and delight in her. He describes her as a palm tree, tall and slim. As he speaks, his desire for her is stirred. He wants to climb this palm tree and take hold of its fruit. He wanted to experience deep intimacy with her.

In verse 8, he compared the smell of her breath to the sweet smell of apples. Could it be the smell of the blossoms as they are beginning to grow in the tree? The very smell of her breath excites him. He compared her mouth to the taste of the finest wine.

Solomon's desire here was for intimacy with his beloved. He wants to touch her and take hold of her. He wants to taste the sweetness of her wine. God expects nothing less of us in our day as well. God is not just a doctrine to be admired at a distance but a real person we need to know and experience on a regular basis. He longs for intimacy with us. It is one thing to admire God as a God of faithfulness but quite another thing to step out into the unknown and experience that faithfulness in real life. The characteristics of God are not just to be admired from a distance they are to be experienced in real life.

In verse 9, the bride responded to the kind words of her lover. "I belong to my lover and his desire is for me." These are words of surrender to him. "Come, my lover," she says. "Let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages." She wants to be alone with him. She suggests a short honeymoon where they could enjoy time alone as a couple. Notice the reference in verse 13 to mandrakes. This was considered to be the flower of love (see Genesis

30:14-16). She had much in store for him --old delights and new treats. There, on their own private honeymoon, they would again delight in their love for each other.

This chapter speaks of forgiveness and restoration of relationships. There is no reason to hold on to anger or resentment. It also applies to our relationship with the Lord. Have you ever really made a mess of things? Maybe, like this bride, you are ashamed of what you have done. Could God really forgive you? Like the bride of this chapter, you need to be reassured. Through this passage, we hear the Lord speaking to us. He, too, has laid up for us all manner of delights. We have yet to experience the fullness of what He has in store for us if we seek Him and receive his forgiveness and love.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about dealing with problems in marriage (managing conflict, time alone, etc.)?
- Compare the groom's love for his bride with God's love for us. What do we learn?
- Have there been times when you needed to reassure your husband or wife? How can you be an encouragement to each other in difficult times?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for His forgiveness. Thank Him for His patience with us even when we really mess things up.
- Ask God to reveal Himself to you in a deeper way. Ask Him to enable you to experience greater intimacy with Him.
- Ask God to help you to minister to your wife or husband as this couple ministered to each other.

THE VALUE OF LOVE

Read Song of Solomon 8:1-7

As we begin chapter 8, the bride is speaking to her lover. "If only you were to me like a brother," she says in verse 1. Knowing how most sisters feel about their brothers, we are left to wonder whether or not this is a compliment. As we look at the context, however, we see the reason for this statement. She goes on in verse 1 to explain that if he were her brother she could kiss him in public. In this culture, the public show of affection was frowned on. Even a husband and wife were expected to use discretion in their relationship with each other in public. There were exceptions to this general rule, however. A sister could kiss or hug her brother in public and it would not be misinterpreted or seen in a negative light.

It is for this reason that the bride tells her lover that she wishes he was her brother. The picture here is one of the bride seeing her husband in public and wanting to run up to him and kiss him. If he were a brother, she could kiss him without having people talk about them.

Verse 5 seems to indicate that the bride and her lover are traveling through the desert. She is leaning on him as they travel. Could it be that as they travel, her desires for her husband are aroused? She is looking for intimacy with her husband but it is neither the time nor the place.

As she leans on her husband, her mind wanders. She tells him what she would do if they did not have to be so concerned about public opinion. "I would lead you and bring you to the house of my mother," she told him in verse 2. There in the privacy of their house, she would give him spiced wine and the nectar of her pomegranates to drink. In verse 3, she dreams of being in her husband's arms while he embraces her. She remembers a time when she had aroused him under an apple tree (verse 5). Her desire is for her husband. She tells her friends not to disturb her. "Don't awaken love until it pleases," she says (verse 4). "Leave us alone to enjoy our love."

All these thoughts cause her to cry out to her husband. "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (verse 6). A seal was used to claim possession. She is asking him to claim her as his own, to possess her. She wants his heart to be devoted to her and her alone.

Her heart has been captivated by love for him. She recognizes the power of this love. The love she experienced for him was as strong as death (verse 6). What is as strong as death? The strongest person in the world falls prey to this great enemy. No one, apart from the Lord Jesus has ever conquered death. Love is just as strong. Her love for her husband had overcome her. It controlled her actions and thoughts. The jealousy she experienced for him was as unyielding as the grave. There is no escaping the grave. It never seems to be satisfied. Like the grave, her jealousy for him was overpowering. The flames of her love and

jealousy were like a blazing fire that would not be satisfied. Even rivers of water poured on their love would not extinguish it. Such was her love for her husband. Is this the type of love you experience for your husband or wife? Is this the type of love you experience for God? Nothing will ever extinguish God's love for us.

The bride concludes her reflection by showing us the value of true love. What can we give for true love? Even if a man were to sell everything he had, it could never come up to the price of true love. You could have everything this world had to offer, but if you do not have love you are the poorest of all people. Here in this section, the bride shows us just how much she treasured her husband. The love they had between them was worth more than the world itself. It was a tremendous gift of inestimable value.

Do you treasure the love you have with your spouse? Do you know that the Lord wants to shower you with His love?

For Consideration:

- What price would you put on the love you experience with your husband or wife?
- Have you ever taken the love of your husband or wife for granted? Explain.
- What needs to happen in your life before you can experience a deeper relationship with your husband or wife? What needs to happen before you can experience a deeper and more intimate relationship with God?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you a greater appreciation for your spouse. Ask Him to refresh your love for each other.
- Thank God that though we have often failed Him, His love for us never changes.
- Ask God to refresh your love for Him. Ask Him to show you more of the depth of His love for you.

35

A THOUSAND SHEKELS FOR YOU

Read Song of Solomon 8:8-14

As we conclude, we are taken back to the time when Solomon's bride was still at home. Her brothers are speaking about her and their concern for her future. Let's break in on this conversation.

"We have a little sister and she has no breasts," says one brother to another. What we should understand from this is that she is still very young. "What will we do with her on the day she is spoken for?" they ask. The brothers are sensing a responsibility for their little sister. They know that the day is coming when some young man will seek her hand in marriage. The brothers are concerned for their little sister and what to do if a young man should call asking to marry her. How would they prepare her for this occasion? Listen to what they say in verse 9.

"If she is a wall we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar" (verse

9). What are they saying here? The key to understanding what these brothers are saying is our interpretation of the words "wall" and "door." A wall is meant for keeping things out. A door, on the other hand, lets things in. If their sister was a "wall" and resisted the attempts of her suitors to win her heart or if she did not grow up attractive enough to win the heart of a suitor, then the brothers would step in and do their part to make her more attractive. They saw it as their responsibility to find a suitable husband for her. If on the other hand, she proved to be a "door," that is, too open or vulnerable to the advances of her suitors, they would enclose her with cedar boards to protect her from harm. They cared deeply for their little sister and saw it as their responsibility to see that she was married to the right man.

The young girl now speaks for herself in verses 10-11. "I am a wall," she says. I have resisted the attempts of my suitors. Though she was a "wall" and resisted the attempts of her suitors, it was not because she was unattractive. She speaks about her breasts being like towers adorning the wall that she was. She was well developed and beautiful as a woman. When her lover saw her, he was attracted to her. She brought great contentment to her lover (verse 10).

From this statement about how her beauty had won the heart of her lover, the bride shows us a picture of Solomon's vineyard. This vineyard was leased to tenants. They would pay Solomon 1000 shekels for the use of the vineyard. The tenants would then hire servants to work in the vineyard for them. These servants would be paid 200 shekels for their efforts.

In verse 13, the bride compares herself to a vineyard filled with pleasant fruits. She has already compared her body to a vineyard in Song of Solomon 1:6. Unlike the vineyards

of Solomon, however, her body was not for sale. "The thousand shekels are for you O Solomon," she says. I give myself to you freely.

The book ends with the cry of Solomon's to his bride.

You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice.

The picture here is of Solomon's bride in one of his gardens with all her friends. Solomon calls to her and tells her he wants to be with her. She has offered herself freely to him. Solomon now calls her to come to him.

The call of Solomon to his bride is also the call of the Lord God to our hearts today. We have offered ourselves to him. Now he is taking us up on our offer. He calls us to himself. He calls us to communion and intimacy. What will be your response?

Notice the encouragement of the final verse of this book. "Come away, my lover," she responds. "You long to hear my voice and I long to be with you. Come with me and let us be like a gazelle or a young stag walking through the spice-laden mountains." This is a picture of peace, security, intimacy and communion. Together they walk in privacy in the beautiful fragrant mountains. This is a fitting end to the Song of Solomon. In perfect communion, the two lovers walk through the beautiful and fragrant mountains. Nothing disturbs their communion and intimacy. They are blessed by each other and delight in each other. This is a picture of what God intends for marriage. It is also a picture of what God intends for our relationship with Him.

For Consideration:

- Consider your relationship with your husband or wife. Have you lost the joy of your relationship? Have you lost the ability to freely give yourself? What are you looking for in your relationship now?
- Are you experiencing intimacy with God? Are you hearing His voice? What blocks this communion? What encouragement do you find in this passage?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to praise the Lord for His desire for you.
- This book reveals the communion and intimacy that is possible between God and His children. Ask God to reveal to you those things that block that communion.
- Ask God to strengthen your marriage so that it is a clearer reflection of the desire he has for His relationship with you.
- Do you know a couple who are struggling with their relationship? Take a moment to pray that God would refresh them and heal any struggles they experience in their marriage.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books are now being translated into a variety of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

For more information about Light To My Path visit our website at www.lighttomypath.ca