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UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

The Book of Ecclesiastes is in many ways very different from every other book of the Bible. Yet it is certainly a part of the Word of God. Paul tells us:

ALL SCRIPTURE [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

This certainly also applies to the Book of Ecclesiastes. But, as these two verses show us, there are DIFFERENT purposes for which God inspired different Scriptures. Some Scriptures were inspired for the explicit reason to reprove and to correct us. That too is a part of equipping us so that we may produce "all good works" in our lives. Others are to instruct us.

However, it should be equally clear that God expects us to THINK when we read His Word. We need to learn to correctly DIVIDE the Scriptures. As Paul had already told Timothy earlier in the same book:

STUDY to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, RIGHTLY DIVIDING the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

It takes effort to rightly divide the Word of God. This means that there will be times when people don't really get the point God is trying to get across; instead people will at times read their own ideas right into the Bible.

I mention this because Ecclesiastes is in many ways an enigmatic book, liberally sprinkled with contradictions. Unless we understand exactly what it is that God is trying to show us, we can easily misunderstand the purpose of this book.

So let's start by taking a closer look at Solomon's situation at the time when he wrote this book.

SOLOMON'S OWN SITUATION

Early in Solomon's reign God had appeared to him in a dream (1 Kings 3:5). At that time Solomon asked God to give him "an understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:9). Solomon didn't ask for wisdom; he asked for UNDERSTANDING. And so God agreed and gave Solomon "a wise AND an understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:12; also 1 Kings 4:29).

After 20 years (1 Kings 9:10), during which time Solomon built the Temple for 7 years and his own palace for the next 13 years, God appeared to Solomon "the second time" (1 Kings 9:2) and God set before Solomon A CONDITION! God said: "IF YOU WILL WALK BEFORE ME, as David your father walked, in integrity of heart ... THEN I WILL ESTABLISH THE THRONE OF YOUR KINGDOM UPON ISRAEL FOR EVER ..." (1 Kings 9:4-5).

But Solomon did NOT continue to walk before God "in the integrity of his heart". Solomon compromised! God tells us that Solomon ... "went after Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom, the

abomination of the Ammonites" (1 Kings 11:5). And so Solomon "DID EVIL in the sight of the LORD" (1 Kings 11:6). Solomon even built "a high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab ... and for Molech ... and likewise did he for all his strange wives" (1 Kings 11:7-8).

The result was that God ... "WAS ANGRY WITH SOLOMON", since Solomon did these things in spite of God having appeared to him on two occasions (1 Kings 11:9). And then, after Solomon had reigned for forty years (1 Kings 11:42), he died. This means that if he had been only a 14-year old or a 15-year old teenager when he became king (a strong possibility), that he was at the time of his death only about 54 or 55 years old.

The perspective we find in the Book of Ecclesiastes is that of an older man. Thus it seems fairly clear that SOLOMON WROTE THIS BOOK IN THE LAST 5 YEARS OR SO OF HIS LIFE, when he was around 50 years old.

It should be quite clear that this book was written at the time when God ... "WAS ANGRY WITH SOLOMON"! This is important to understand. Here we have a book of the Bible that was written by someone with whom God, at the time of writing this book, was ANGRY, as is stated very plainly in 1 Kings 11:9.

When we read the rest of chapter 11, we see that God sent the prophet "Ahijah the Shilonite" (1 Kings 11:29) to tell Jeroboam that God would punish Solomon and take 10 tribes away from him. There is no indication in that chapter that Solomon ever repented of compromising with idolatry in order to please his foreign wives. He didn't tear down any of the pagan shrines which he had built. We are told that those pagan shrines were not torn down until King Josiah desecrated them over 300 years after the time of Solomon. Notice:

And the high places that [were] before Jerusalem, which [were] on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had builded for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Zidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of the Moabites, and for Milcom the abomination of the children of Ammon, did the king [Josiah] defile. (2 Kings 23:13)

The fact that Solomon died in his early to mid-fifties is also an indication that God was still angry with him at the time when he died ... the wisest man had a relatively short lifespan. Long life is a blessing God bestows on people, something Solomon himself had commented upon in places like Proverbs 3:2, and Proverbs 3:16, and which is something God Himself had embodied in the context of the ten commandments (see Exodus 20:12). [Obviously there are exceptions to this rule, when special circumstances warrant them; e.g. the case of John the Baptist dying young, etc..]

So in order to understand the Book of Ecclesiastes, we need to keep in mind that Solomon wrote this at a time when God was already ANGRY with Solomon, when Solomon had already built several pagan shrines in the area of Jerusalem ... and Solomon understood full well that God was angry with him.

THAT IS THE MIND WHICH PRODUCED THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES!

Solomon himself was no longer obeying God when he wrote this book. He knew what was right, but he himself wasn't putting into practice the things he knew were right. And he knew that God was angry with him.

THE PURPOSE AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WHOLE BOOK

THE PURPOSE for writing this book is very clearly stated early in the first chapter. It is found in verse 13:

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all [things] that are done under heaven ... (Ecclesiastes 1:13)

Solomon's purpose was to find out how to get the most out of life, the best way to really enjoy life. He wanted to find out what the most enjoyable activities for any person could be ... and then he wanted to engage in those activities. What would bring the greatest possible pleasures and enjoyment to anyone is what Solomon wanted to know.

HIS METHOD in this search for the ultimate happiness was to put everything to the test himself. He was not going to draw any conclusions from what other people might claim or assert; he wanted to know for himself, from personal experience. And towards that end Solomon had devoted a large part of his adult life.

At the time of writing this book Solomon had experienced as much as he felt he could possibly have experienced; he had done his utmost to outperform any other possible contenders for the title of "the ultimate pleasure-seeker". If anything, he almost seems to have been driven by a desire to ensure that no one after him would ever catch up to his "achievement" of the greatest pleasure-seeker of all time. He proudly states his qualifications early in the book, in the confidence that they were greater than what anyone else would ever achieve.

THE CRITERION Solomon used for evaluating every possible experience was: what do you actually GET from any given experience? Or, as it is put in the KJV, WHAT PROFIT IS THERE IN ALL LABOUR? This is already spelled out in verse 3 of chapter 1.

WHAT PROFIT hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)

In other words, what do you really GET from the things you do, be they work or be they play, be they responsibilities or be they entertainment? What do you get?

THE PERSPECTIVE from which Solomon approached this whole question is totally carnal, selfish and physical! The perspective Solomon employed is that THIS PHYSICAL LIFE is all that matters. His perspective does NOT make allowance for a future existence in the presence of God! His perspective is limited to the here and now. Repeated references to God do not change this perspective.

This perspective is fully compatible with his spiritual status at the time he wrote this book ... he knew very well that he had compromised his integrity before God, that God was angry with him, and that for him there was really nothing to look forward to beyond the point of death! And so the inevitability of death is in Solomon's eyes a great evil.

THE CONCLUSION Solomon reaches is greatly influenced by his perspective. And that conclusion is that EVERYTHING is futile and empty and without meaning in the long run. Or as it is in the KJV:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all [is] vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

The conclusion is that NOTHING in this life can really give us lasting happiness ... no physical experience, no great achievement, no position of prestige or power, and no physical possession!

Solomon presents life AS IF these physical things are all there is to life. NOW IF these things are all we will ever get, THEN life isn't really worth it! And that is Solomon's assessment ... it is all "vanity", empty and futile.

AT NO STAGE does Solomon claim to present a godly perspective! He does not claim to speak FOR God and he does not claim to present God's point of view in this whole question. It is HIS OWN personal view which this book presents to us. And we need to read it as such!

To summarize these points:

Solomon's goal was to seek pleasure and happiness. His method was by personal experiences, by doing everything himself. The criterion he employed was: how do I feel afterwards? His perspective was that this life is all we've got; and his conclusion was that nothing in this life really satisfies us for very long.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

In this book Solomon does several things:

- 1) He conducts personal experiments, where he himself is the "guinea pig".
- 2) He makes astute observations about the world around him.
- 3) He draws his own personal conclusions, giving us his own personal assessments.

The whole Book of Ecclesiastes only contains 222 verses. And in this book Solomon uses the personal pronoun "I" 87 times in 65 different verses. Thus on average he uses the pronoun "I" two times for every five verses.

Clearly, there is a lot of direct focus on Solomon himself and on his personal views. In other books of the Old Testament (excluding the ones Solomon authored, i.e. excluding Proverbs and Song of Solomon) the use of the pronoun "I" most often refers to GOD, where the prophet is quoting the words of God. And in the Book of Psalms the pronoun "I" generally presents a situation where the author is approaching God with meekness and humility for help and for intervention. But in Ecclesiastes the pronoun "I" directs the focus of attention onto the person of Solomon and on HIS ideas and HIS opinions.

When we study this book we need to differentiate between Solomon's OBSERVATIONS and Solomon's PERSONAL OPINIONS!

Solomon was a "wise" man, and his OBSERVATIONS are generally astute and correct! The problem comes in when he presents to us his PERSONAL OPINIONS!

SOLOMON'S OPINIONS ARE ALMOST INVARIABLY WRONG!

And that is something we should expect! The experiments Solomon conducted in his quest for happiness were all conducted from the platform of selfishness ... hedonism might be the more correct word to use in this context. It was selfishness in the extreme.

Solomon's OPINIONS were inevitably influenced by his own spiritual state ... having compromised with idolatry and knowing that God was displeased with him and knowing that God had pronounced a penalty for his sins, yet being unwilling to humble himself before God, to repent, to change and to seek

forgiveness.

The Book of Ecclesiastes displays a total lack of humility! You just don't find humility in this book; it wasn't part of Solomon's thinking at that stage of his life. Rather, the picture which Solomon paints focuses on HIS greatness. Don't mistake expressions of Solomon's frustrations with humility.

Solomon knew what was right; and so he can tell us WHAT is right. But Solomon's value system was not right. That was inevitable, because the value systems of people who are compromising with the truth of God are NEVER "right"! It is impossible for anyone who is compromising his integrity towards God to have a right value system.

And that is precisely why Solomon's personal views and opinions are invariably in conflict with a godly perspective.

Let's now look at some examples in this Book of Ecclesiastes.

SOME POINTS OF INCONSISTENCY

1) Regarding life and death:

On the one hand Solomon says that it is better to be dead than to be alive; and it is still better to never have existed in the first place.

Wherefore I PRAISED THE DEAD which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better [is he] than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3)

And even a miscarriage is supposedly better off than those who have been born into this life?

If a man beget an hundred [children], and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also [that] he have no burial; I say, [that] AN UNTIMELY BIRTH [IS] BETTER THAN HE. For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known [any thing]: this hath more rest than the other. (Ecclesiastes 6:3-5)

And with these points in mind, Solomon also claims that the day of death is better than the day of one's birth.

A good name [is] better than precious ointment; and THE DAY OF DEATH than the day of one's birth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND Solomon urges us to make the effort to not die before our time (why, if death is really better?) ...

Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: WHY SHOULDEST THOU DIE BEFORE THY TIME? (Ecclesiastes 7:17)

And then he refers to death as "an evil" ...

THIS [IS] AN EVIL among all [things] that are done under the sun, that [there is] one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness [is] in their heart while they live, and after that [they go] to the dead. (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

And then he says that as long as we are alive there is hope (for what, if death is better?) ...

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for A LIVING DOG IS BETTER THAN A DEAD LION. (Ecclesiastes 9:4)

So what do we have in these above inconsistencies? When Solomon is negative about life, he is expressing his own opinions, based on his own spiritual circumstances at that time. That was how he PERSONALLY perceived life at that point in his life. And when he speaks positively about life, then he is being more objective.

2) Regarding the value of working:

On the one hand Solomon says that all of life is useless, empty and of no value. Thus he says.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; ALL [IS] VANITY. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

Then he says that at first he REJOICED in his labour.

And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for MY HEART REJOICED IN ALL MY LABOUR: and this was my portion of all my labour. (Ecclesiastes 2:10)

But that rejoicing wore off after a little while, and then he HATED all his own work and achievements.

Yea, I HATED ALL MY LABOUR which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. (Ecclesiastes 2:18)

This negative attitude about his own labours went to the point of despair.

Therefore I went about TO CAUSE MY HEART TO DESPAIR of all the labour which I took under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:20)

And his conclusion was that the best you can possibly do is live for the moment.

[There is] nothing better for a man, [than] that he should eat and drink, and [that] he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it [was] from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:24)

Because that's all you'll ever get out of life.

What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? (Ecclesiastes 3:9)

Solomon's implied answer to this question is: NOTHING!

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND he urges us to put our hearts into everything we do, something he himself no longer did (how could he, when his labours amounted to building pagan shrines?).

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, DO [IT] WITH THY MIGHT; for [there is] no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest. (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

And while he on the one hand said that:

... [THERE IS] NOTHING BETTER, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that [is] his portion ... (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

On the other hand he said it is better for us to be mourning:

[IT IS] BETTER TO GO TO THE HOUSE OF MOURNING, than to go to the house of feasting: for that [is] the end of all men (Ecclesiastes 7:2)

Again, these inconsistencies reflect Solomon's own thinking. His negative attitude about his own works and achievements (which included the incredible privilege to have built the Temple for God!) reflects his own perspective, where he knew the future held no hope for him without genuine repentance. His future was very bleak. Where he speaks positively about us putting our whole hearts into our every activity, he is again speaking more objectively without letting his own situation totally obscure what is really right in God's sight.

Clearly Solomon was being "DOUBLE MINDED".

3) Regarding himself:

On the one hand Solomon KNEW that the best thing anyone can do is to fear God.

Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his [days] be prolonged, yet surely I know that IT SHALL BE WELL WITH THEM THAT FEAR GOD, which fear before him: (Ecclesiastes 8:12)

And that is what he repeats at the end of the book:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: FEAR GOD, AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS: for this [is] the whole [duty] of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND he also admits that he himself no longer accepted correction from anyone.

Better [is] a poor and a wise child than AN OLD AND FOOLISH KING, WHO WILL NO MORE BE ADMONISHED. (Ecclesiastes 4:13)

He is here speaking from personal experience! He is ADMITTING that he himself no longer accepted admonitions. And that is why God was angry with him. And in so doing he still recognized that this made him "a FOOLISH king", but he wasn't going to change.

4) Regarding the value of wisdom:

On the one hand Solomon stated that wisdom only brings grief and sorrow:

For IN MUCH WISDOM [IS] MUCH GRIEF: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

He then negatively asks: what really is the value of wisdom?

Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also [is] vanity. For [there is] no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now [is] in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise [man]? as the fool. (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16)

He continues to question that the wise person has any advantage.

For WHAT HATH THE WISE MORE THAN THE FOOL? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living? (Ecclesiastes 6:8)

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND he states that wisdom excels folly.

Then I saw that WISDOM EXCELLETH FOLLY, as far as light excelleth darkness. (Ecclesiastes 2:13)

And wisdom is good and it gives life.

Wisdom [is] good with an inheritance: and [by it there is] profit to them that see the sun. For wisdom [is] a defence, [and] money [is] a defence: but the excellency of knowledge [is, that] wisdom giveth life to them that have it. (Ecclesiastes 7:1-2)

And wisdom lights up your face.

Who [is] as the wise [man]? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A MAN'S WISDOM MAKETH HIS FACE TO SHINE, and the boldness of his face shall be changed. (Ecclesiastes 8:1)

And wisdom strengthens a man.

WISDOM STRENGTHENETH THE WISE more than ten mighty [men] which are in the city. (Ecclesiastes 7:19)

Solomon claims that he himself was wise.

And moreover, because THE PREACHER WAS WISE, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, [and] set in order many proverbs. (Ecclesiastes 12:9)

Yet he had already admitted to being foolish.

Better [is] a poor and a wise child than an old and FOOLISH KING (i.e. Solomon himself), who will no more be admonished. (Ecclesiastes 4:13)

Again, on this subject of wisdom Solomon displays an inconsistency, vacillating between what he knew deep-down was right (that wisdom is good), and what he personally felt (wisdom hadn't helped him to remain a person of integrity).

5) Regarding the wicked:

On the one hand Solomon says that the wicked prolong their lives.

All [things] have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just [man] that perisheth in his righteousness, and THERE IS A WICKED [MAN] THAT PROLONGETH [HIS LIFE] IN HIS WICKEDNESS. (Ecclesiastes 7:15)

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND he says the wicked can't prolong their lives.

But it shall not be well with the wicked, NEITHER SHALL HE PROLONG [HIS] DAYS, [which are] as a shadow; because he feareth not before God. (Ecclesiastes 8:13)

Again, he has given the observation that the wicked sometimes SEEM to get away with it. But he actually knew quite well that the wicked don't really prolong their lives. He probably realized that his own life was coming to an end, and there was nothing he felt he could do to change that. Repentance doesn't enter the picture anywhere in this discussion.

6) Regarding how we should view sorrow:

On the one hand Solomon says that sorrow is better than joy and laughter.

SORROW [IS] BETTER THAN LAUGHTER: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. (Ecclesiastes 7:3)

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND he also says that we should REMOVE sorrow from our lives (why remove it, if it is really better?).

Therefore REMOVE SORROW FROM THY HEART, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth [are] vanity. (Ecclesiastes 11:10)

These are all examples of some of THE INCONSISTENCIES THAT SOLOMON PRESENTS IN THIS

BOOK. In the past most people in God's Church have tried to diligently reconcile all these conflicting statements, by trying to think of situations where they could possibly be true. The approach has been: Solomon MUST obviously be right, and there must be some circumstances for which his statements are correct.

However, what this approach did is overlook Solomon's own state of mind at the time when he wrote this book. Shortly I will present some clear statements which show that many of Solomon's views are ungodly. And we need to recognize that Solomon's lack of consistency is an expression of a mind that had rejected some of God's ways, a mind that had knowingly compromised its integrity.

Let's now look at Solomon's utter and undisguised selfishness.

SOLOMON'S VERY SELFISH WAYS

Notice how Solomon approached life.

I MADE ME GREAT WORKS; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all [kind of] fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got [me] servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, [as] musical instruments, and that of all sorts. (Ecclesiastes 2:4-8)

His focus was on enjoying pleasures to the ultimate, popularly referred to as "wine, women and song". There is obviously an absence of concern for anyone else in this description ... he wasn't really bothered whether his pursuit of happiness would hurt other people or not. He most certainly wasn't concerned for the women who all had to share one husband with 999 other women.

To achieve all the things he wanted, he also did not hold back from taxing his own people to the bone. As people said after Solomon's death.

THY FATHER MADE OUR YOKE GRIEVOUS: now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee. (1 Kings 12:4)

Rehoboam acknowledged that his father had imposed "a heavy yoke" on people ... [Rehoboam himself had 18 wives and 60 concubines and 88 children; see 2 Chronicles 11:21.]

And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father [also] chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. (1 Kings 12:14)

Solomon lived in absolutely staggering luxury.

Now THE WEIGHT OF GOLD THAT CAME TO SOLOMON IN ONE YEAR was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold, (1 Kings 10:14; also 1 Kings 10:21-23)

Can you picture Solomon receiving far in excess of ONE MILLION OUNCES of gold in one year? That was just a fraction of the wealth he collected every year. Furthermore, the people had to provide 30 head of cattle and 100 sheep for Solomon's table EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR!

And Solomon's provision FOR ONE DAY was thirty measures of fine flour, and threescore measures of meal, Ten fat oxen, and twenty oxen out of the pastures, and an hundred sheep, beside harts, and roebucks, and fallowdeer, and fatted fowl. (1 Kings 4:22-23)

Allowing for no provisions like this being needed for the Sabbaths, that still amounted to 9300 head of cattle and 31000 sheep for Solomon's table EVERY YEAR! The luxury was staggering and the people had to foot the bill; they had a heavy burden to bear so that Solomon could "enjoy pleasure".

I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, THEREFORE ENJOY PLEASURE: and, behold, this also [is] vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:1)

In Ecclesiastes 2:10 we have a description of the height of hedonism.

And WHATSOEVER MINE EYES DESIRED I KEPT NOT FROM THEM, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. (Ecclesiastes 2:10)

No restraint and no character! Whatever I wanted, I took; there was no one to question me or to challenge me.

Then he hated life.

THEREFORE I HATED LIFE; because the work that is wrought under the sun [is] grievous unto me: for all [is] vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I HATED ALL MY LABOUR which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. (Ecclesiastes 2:17-18)

That too is an expression of selfishness! He HATED having to let his own son inherit the things he had produced, and the fortune he had amassed. Talk about selfishness!

Solomon was worried that someone after him might possibly try to outdo him. So he tried to prove that he had "done it all", and that nobody after him could possibly experience more or do more.

And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: FOR WHAT [CAN] THE MAN [DO] THAT COMETH AFTER THE KING? [even] that which hath been already done. (Ecclesiastes 2:12)

This was a selfish view, HOPING that no one would ever outdo him. As it has happened, THOUSANDS of people have actually outdone Solomon in many areas of life; and they have experienced luxuries Solomon didn't even dream of, like travelling in air-conditioned cars and planes; listening to stereo recordings and watching films of any description; sky-diving and snorkeling in tropical waters; heated personal swimming pools and saunas; speaking by phone to people on the other side of the earth; computers with incredible abilities for displaying information and for solving problems; viewing this earth

from outer space; access to 50 different TV channels; watching events live via TV as they are taking place in other countries; etc., etc..

Solomon had incredible amounts of gold ... but there were only very few things he could buy with it ... some chariots, shields, cutlery, decorations, tableware, ornaments, jewelry, etc.. But it couldn't buy him the experience of sailing around the world in the luxury of the QE 2, or the opportunity to do some deep-sea diving, or to buy the perfect recordings of thousands of different songs on CD's to play back at a moment's notice, or a large colour TV with a satellite dish to receive hundreds of different stations, or the opportunity to take colour photographs of whatever took his fancy, or to parasail behind a motorboat, or to fly in a helicopter into the Grand Canyon, or to visit far away countries in less than 24 hours, etc..

Understand that ECCLESIASTES 2:12 IS A BOAST, which Solomon HOPED would remain true. If Solomon had had access to our modern technologies and developments, then he would have done all of these things as well. But he never had that opportunity. Judged by the standards Solomon himself presents in Ecclesiastes 2:1-10, we have to conclude that there are a whole range of activities and experiences available today, to which Solomon never had access; he missed out!

He had no REAL concern at all for the women he had married.

And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart [is] snares and nets, [and] her hands [as] bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, [counting] one by one, to find out the account: Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. (Ecclesiastes 7:26-28)

How bitter was it for the women to share one man with 999 other women? Solomon was just thinking of himself, that's all!

A little later he wrote.

Where the word of a king [is, there is] power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou? (Ecclesiastes 8:4)

He is obviously saying this with his own position in mind. Thus: I am the king; so don't disobey me. WHO CAN TELL ME WHAT TO DO? Nobody! The fact that I am into paganism and am disobeying God is not your business.

Understand that Solomon is in this verse claiming that he was not accountable to anyone ... he didn't WANT to be accountable to anyone. By contrast, the prophet Nathan had VERY PLAINLY confronted King David with "What doest thou?" after David had sinned with Bathsheba, and David was not allowed to get away with being a law unto himself. And here we see Solomon trying to exalt his own position to the status of NO ACCOUNTABILITY TO ANYONE.

Solomon then continued to encourage an "eat-drink-and-be-merry" attitude.

Then I commended mirth, because A MAN HATH NO BETTER THING UNDER THE SUN, THAN TO EAT, AND TO DRINK, AND TO BE MERRY: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

That is the type of excuse carnal people put into practice all the time. And they have Solomon's endorsement.

SOLOMON'S VERY NEGATIVE APPROACH TO LIFE

Now think about this: how many people since the time of Adam have ever had the privilege of having God appear to them in a dream on two separate occasions? VERY, VERY FEW!

Of those who have had this privilege, how many have had the privilege of God saying to them directly: ask what I shall give you? NO OTHER PERSON AT ALL!

And because of his humble attitude at that time, God gave Solomon FAR MORE than he asked for. God gave him EVERYTHING that most people could possibly have asked for ... understanding and wisdom, wealth and prestige, the top position of political power, a reign of peace, and freedom from persecution.

What more could God possibly have given to Solomon?

So the question is: WHERE is Solomon's gratitude for the incredible blessings God bestowed on him? He never had to suffer persecution, as most of God's servants have had to do, and he didn't have to make any sacrifices to obey God.

So what right did Solomon, of all people, have to be so negative about life? His is the most negative attitude about life that you can find anywhere in the Bible. What justification is there for all this negativism? None whatsoever!

Let's notice some examples.

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all [things] that are done under heaven: THIS SORE TRAVAIL hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. (Ecclesiastes 1:13)

Here he claims that life is "a sore travail", a grievous task, that it is tough, etc.. Next he claims that life is filled with sorrow and grief.

For ALL HIS DAYS [ARE] SORROWS, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:23)

This is again a very negative view of life. This is NOT a true reflection of what life is like for all people. THIS IS LIFE VIEWED FROM A VERY NEGATIVE VANTAGE POINT. Solomon continues to assert that life is useless and empty, i.e. "vanity".

Then I returned, and I SAW VANITY UNDER THE SUN. (Ecclesiastes 4:7)

For who knoweth what [is] good for man in [this] life, ALL THE DAYS OF HIS VAIN LIFE which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 6:12)

Again, Solomon claims that life is vain and useless, without value. Then he claims that success in life is

just the luck of the draw.

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race [is] not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but TIME AND CHANCE HAPPENETH TO THEM ALL. (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

THIS STATEMENT IS NOT TRUE!!

Yes, there may very well be some occasions when people are "lucky", when time and chance was on their side; or when they were "unlucky", when time and chance worked against them. But in THE VAST MAJORITY OF CASES the race IS won by the swiftest man; and the battle IS won by the stronger party; and people of wisdom and understanding ARE the ones who succeed! Many top sportsmen will tell you that the more diligently they practice, the "luckier" they get! And a genius may tell you that his success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration ... hard work!

In the vast majority of cases success IS directly linked to THE AMOUNT OF EFFORT EXPENDED by the person involved! That is why the top performers in every area engage in such rigorous schedules of practices and rehearsals.

So don't buy Solomon's claim simply because OCCASIONALLY someone may be "lucky" to win or to succeed. This statement is typically THE EXCUSE that is put forward by those who fail, that those who did better than they did were just "lucky"! But it is not true! There is a direct connection between success and the amount of effort we are willing to expend.

So Solomon's statement is the typical negative view put forward by those who fail.

Next, Solomon gives the most negative view of old age that you could possibly come up with. His claim is that old age consists of "EVIL DAYS" and years in which we no longer have any pleasures. Notice:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, WHILE THE EVIL DAYS COME NOT, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; (Ecclesiastes 12:1)

In the next few verses, Ecclesiastes 12:2-7, Solomon paints a very gloomy picture of old age: the arms are trembling, the legs are bowlegged, the teeth have fallen out and the eyesight is becoming dim (verse 3); the thin lips are shut, there are no teeth to really chew with, sleep is not sound and the voice has become feeble (verse 4); all kinds of fears have taken hold of the person, the hair has gone grey or fallen out, there are diseases like gout, the physical strength has gone as has the sex drive, and death is rapidly approaching (verse 5); there are health problems affecting the back and the joints, and there is heart disease (verse 6); and then it is all over and you decay and turn to dust (verse 7). It was really all futile and a waste of time, unless you DO turn to God that is.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; ALL [IS] VANITY. (Ecclesiastes 12:8)

These 8 verses give the negative views of someone who has failed, and who desires to justify himself! They are the inevitable consequences of the hedonistic lifestyle Solomon had lived!

BUT THEY ARE NOT TRUE FOR THOSE WHO DILIGENTLY OBEY GOD AND WHO SEEK CONTACT WITH GOD!

That picture of old age was not true for Moses.

And Moses [was] an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. (Deuteronomy 34:7)

And this picture was not true for Caleb at age 85 years.

And now, behold, the LORD hath kept me alive, as he said, these forty and five years, even since the LORD spake this word unto Moses, while [the children of] Israel wandered in the wilderness: and now, lo, I [am] this day fourscore and five years old. AS YET I [AM AS] STRONG THIS DAY as [I was] in the day that Moses sent me: as my strength [was] then, even so [is] my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in. (Joshua 14:10-11)

Today there are many people in their 70's and their 80's who are still running road races, including full marathons, and for whom Solomon's negative picture of old age is simply not true!

It is all a matter of cause and effect!

But that is not something Solomon wished to focus in on when speaking about old age. He preferred to view such degenerate conditions as an inevitable part of old age. But that is not true for people who are willing to exercise restraints, who have THE CHARACTER to control their actions and the things they indulge in.

Solomon lived an unrestrained and debauched life. He wanted to have the opportunity to have sex with 1000 different women, and he withheld his heart from NOTHING that he thought might possibly be exciting (Ecclesiastes 2:10). The result was that by age 50 years Solomon was an "OLD" man, and a very depressing picture of old age was staring him in the face.

In our century there was a film star named Errol Flynn, who was born in 1909 in Hobart, Tasmania and who died in 1959. After he was "discovered" as a Hollywood star in 1935 with his lead role in the movie "Captain Blood", Flynn led a debauched life. He claimed to have slept with a different woman every night for the next 20 years or so, thus claiming to have had sex with several thousand different women. At one stage he was accused of statutory rape, but was acquitted. He was also a very heavy drinker. When he died at age 50 years, the coroner's verdict was that Flynn's body was WORN OUT BY THE RAVAGES OF OLD AGE! Flynn's situation was not unlike the picture of old age that Solomon presents in Ecclesiastes chapter 12.

But Flynn never had access to the wisdom that Solomon had access to.

There is absolutely no justification for Solomon's negative view of life throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon had every possible blessing he could have wanted, but he lacked restraint and real character. And THEREFORE his view of life is so negative. The views he expresses are a way of justifying his own lifestyle.

Let's now notice where Solomon's statements are CLEARLY contrary to God's ways.

SOLOMON'S VIEWS ARE CONTRARY TO GOD'S WAYS!

We have now seen that Solomon's views are very negative and selfish. We have also seen that he is

inconsistent when speaking about the merits of things like life and death, wisdom and sorrow, and the value of working hard.

Now let's notice that in many cases Solomon actually says the opposite of what God teaches us elsewhere in the Bible. Here are some examples:

1) SOLOMON praises the dead because he sees no purpose in trials. His is a selfish view (see Ecclesiastes 4:2).

GOD TELLS US TO CHOOSE LIFE (see Deuteronomy 30:19), that death is a penalty for sins (see Romans 6:23), that death is an enemy (see 1 Corinthians 15:26).

2) SOLOMON praises those who have never yet had the misfortune to live (see Ecclesiastes 4:3). This view is utterly absurd! It is a way of criticizing God's plan to reproduce Himself through mankind.

GOD TELLS US that He is not willing that any should perish (see 2 Peter 3:9) and that He wants all human beings to attain unto salvation (see 1 Timothy 2:4).

3) SOLOMON asserts that a miscarriage (an aborted foetus) is better than not having a decent burial.

If a man beget an hundred [children], and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also [that] he have no burial; I SAY, [that] AN UNTIMELY BIRTH [IS] BETTER THAN HE. (Ecclesiastes 6:3)

This view is again absurd! It is the expression of the vanity of a king. Notice the use of "I SAY"!

GOD TELLS US that a burial has absolutely no consequences on a future life (see Hebrews 11:36-39). According to Solomon's view some of the apostles who were not given a proper burial are worse off than an aborted foetus. A totally wrong view!

4) SOLOMON asserts that the dead have no more a reward to look forward to.

For the living know that they shall die: but THE DEAD know not any thing, NEITHER HAVE THEY ANY MORE A REWARD; for the memory of them is forgotten. (Ecclesiastes 9:5)

This false idea is to motivate people to selfishly focus on enjoying the here and now, and to avoid restraints.

GOD TELLS US that the time for our reward is most assuredly AFTER this physical life (see Revelation 11:18). Paul explained that:

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

THIS VERSE APPLIES PERFECTLY TO SOLOMON AND TO WHAT HE SAYS IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES!

5) SOLOMON claims that there is a time to kill.

A TIME TO KILL, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; (Ecclesiastes 3:3)

THE GOD WHO DOES NOT CONTRADICT HIMSELF SAYS that we are not to kill.

Thou shalt not kill. (Exodus 20:13)

And God points out that to kill is HIS prerogative.

See now that I, [even] I, [am] he, and [there is] no god with me: I KILL, AND I MAKE ALIVE; I wound, and I heal: neither [is there any] that can deliver out of my hand. (Deuteronomy 32:39)

6) SOLOMON says that there is a time to hate.

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:8)

In saying this Solomon is using nothing more than human reasoning.

JESUS CHRIST SAID very plainly that we are not to hate.

But I say unto you, LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44)

7) SOLOMON claims that a miscarriage is better off because it will never have to face problems, because problems are bad, not allowing us to rest.

Moreover HE HATH NOT SEEN THE SUN, nor known [any thing]: this hath more rest than the other. (Ecclesiastes 6:5)

JESUS CHRIST TELLS US to be of good cheer in spite of problems that may come our way.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: BUT BE OF GOOD CHEER; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

And James tells us that we should count it all joy when we are accorded the privilege of suffering trials, which is admittedly hard to do.

My brethren, COUNT IT ALL JOY when ye fall into divers temptations; (James 1:2)

8) SOLOMON claims there is nothing better we can do than to look at the physical, the here and now.

Wherefore I perceive that [there is] nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that [is] his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

JESUS CHRIST SAID that it is far better if we "deny the self" and resist the pulls of our physical natures.

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any [man] will come after me, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

See also Christ's statements in Matthew 10:39 and Matthew 6:25.

9) SOLOMON denies that there is a great purpose for life, and urges us to live for the here and now (all the days of the life of your vanity).

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest ALL THE DAYS OF THE LIFE OF THY VANITY, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that [is] thy portion in [this] life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 9:9)

GOD TELLS US through the Apostle Peter that we should focus on the future inheritance, which God has prepared for us.

Blessed [be] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: (1 Peter 1:3-6)

[Comment: the Hebrew word for "sorrow" in Ecclesiastes 7:3 means "anger, wrath, spite" and is rendered in the Jewish translation as "vexation". Note this for the next point.]

10) SOLOMON claims that anger and vexation are better than joy and laughter.

Vexation is better than laughter ... (Ecclesiastes 7:3, Jewish Publication Society Translation)

PETER TELLS US that "if need be" we are in heaviness for a limited period of time (see 1 Peter 1:6 above). There is a big difference between "if need be" and "is better". Also Paul tells us to ALWAYS rejoice.

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS: [and] again I say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

11) SOLOMON introduces the concept that human beings are no better than "beasts" and have no preeminence above beasts.

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all [is] vanity. (Ecclesiastes 3:18-19)

GOD TELLS US that it is our potential to rule over all things with Jesus Christ, an infinite "preeminence" above beasts.

But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing [that is] not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. (Hebrews 2:6-8)

12) SOLOMON claims that life is empty and unsatisfactory.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all [is] vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

This is the view of a sinner. And this statement is ONLY true for sinners!

None of God's servants would have described their own existences in these words. For example, Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong would not have said this about his own life. Similarly that is not the way Paul saw it, when he said that he had fought a good fight (see 2 Timothy 4:7). Paul clearly felt that it was worth it! Paul also told us that it is our potential to be the heirs of God (see Romans 8:16-18), a far cry from it "all being vanity".

13) SOLOMON admitted that he hated life.

Therefore I HATED LIFE; because the work that is wrought under the sun [is] grievous unto me: for all [is] vanity and vexation of spirit. (Ecclesiastes 2:17)

That is a sin! It is totally selfish. God is the Giver of life, and to hate the gifts of God is a sin. Earlier in his own life Solomon had said:

By humility [and] the fear of the LORD [are] riches, and honour, and life. (Proverbs 22:4)

To hate life shows a lack of the fear of God.

14) SOLOMON claims that he has done it all, and experienced everything there is to experience.

The thing that hath been, it [is that] which shall be; and that which is done [is] that which shall be done: and [THERE IS] NO NEW [THING] UNDER THE SUN. Is there [any] thing whereof it may be said, See, this [is] new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10)

This is firstly false, and secondly very opinionated! It was VERY PRESUMPTUOUS to assume that nothing new would ever come along AFTER HIS OWN TIME.

GOD TELLS US that knowledge would increase.

But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, [even] to the time of the end: many

shall run to and fro, and KNOWLEDGE SHALL BE INCREASED. (Daniel 12:4)

Greater knowledge has produced more things and more experiences. Solomon's statement denies progress in the physical sphere. The point is that other people HAVE INDEED been able to do things and to experience things that Solomon, with all his wisdom and in all his regal splendour, didn't even dream about ... the results of the increase in knowledge and increased abilities.

These examples should suffice to show that many of Solomon's opinions are in conflict with other statements in the Bible.

That leads us to the big question: well, if Solomon is stating opinions that are contrary to God's views, then WHY IS ECCLESIASTES IN THE BIBLE AT ALL?

WHY GOD WANTED THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES IN THE BIBLE

This is the important question to understand. Because it is a part of the Bible, therefore many people have assumed that all of Solomon's statements must somehow be true. That assumption has caused people to look for ways to "make his opinions fit in" with the rest of God's Word. But that amounts to "forcing" certain interpretations upon many of Solomon's statements. And, in so doing, the clear and obvious meanings of Solomon's statements are brushed aside; and it is claimed that Solomon only intended his statements to apply to certain specific circumstances.

But this approach ignores Solomon's state of mind at the time when he wrote Ecclesiastes. He really WAS very negative about life, because for HIM there was only a bleak future, one where a penalty from God Almighty loomed very large on the horizon.

Let me give you a parallel from another passage in the Bible.

Satan clearly told Eve: "You shall NOT surely die" (Genesis 3:4). Now Satan's INTENT was obviously to deceive Eve. Satan was challenging the truth of God's prior statement. Now can we find a way to make Satan's statement "fit in" with the rest of God's Word? Yes, we can! If we say: that statement was intended to apply to all those who are in the first resurrection, THEN it will be a true statement AFTER that resurrection has taken place. It is true that all those who are in the first resurrection shall NOT surely die again! But this kind of reasoning obviously ignores the clear intent of Satan's statement, which was to deceive Eve ... and in fact he was successful in achieving that deception.

While this line of reasoning is easily recognized when we are looking at Satan's statement, it is not so easy to see at all when we look at statements from Solomon. When we "look for" ways to make Solomon's statements "fit", circumstances under which they are correct, THEN we are ignoring the obvious intent in Solomon's statements. The intent of his statements CANNOT be divorced from his current state of mind ... out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (see Matthew 12:34), and this applies just as much to Solomon as it does to everyone else.

There is no esoteric hidden message in Ecclesiastes, whereby all of Solomon's statements and his opinions are intended to be applied only to specific circumstances. Solomon intended for his readers to take his statements at face value. He meant EXACTLY what he said. From his specific vantage point his statements are correct; BUT Solomon's point of view is VASTLY DIFFERENT from GOD'S POINT OF VIEW! And from God's point of view many of Solomon's statements are NOT correct at all.

So why did God include this book in the Bible?

1) We need to understand something about "wisdom".

When God first created the one we know as "Satan", that being had been "FULL OF WISDOM" (see Ezekiel 28:12). But when Satan sinned, then he also "CORRUPTED HIS WISDOM".

Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, THOU HAST CORRUPTED THY WISDOM by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee. (Ezekiel 28:17)

TRUE WISDOM IS ALWAYS CONDITIONAL on an attitude of submission and obedience to God. The act of sinning DESTROYS real wisdom. That was the case with Satan, and that was also the case with Solomon. And even as Satan does not understand that his wisdom has been grossly corrupted by his sinful ways (Satan thinks he is STILL wise, even today), so Solomon did not really understand that he had lost much of the real wisdom he had been given earlier in his life, even though he himself had written about this earlier in his life. For example, Solomon wrote:

The fear of the LORD [is] THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: and the knowledge of the holy [is] understanding. (Proverbs 9:10; also Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 15:33)

When people lose the fear of God, then THEY ALSO LOSE WISDOM. And that had happened to Solomon by the time he wrote Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Ezekiel was written approximately 400 years after the time of Solomon. Without attaching any particular importance to it, it is interesting to note what Ezekiel 28:3 says about the prince of Tyre:

Behold, thou [art] WISER THAN DANIEL; there is no secret that they can hide from thee: (Ezekiel 28:3)

Yes, Daniel certainly was a wise man; but why doesn't it say here that ... "you are wiser than SOLOMON"? After all, Solomon was supposed to have been "the wisest man of all", right? See again 1 Kings 10:23-24 in this regard. Ezekiel 28:3 is nothing more than an interesting observation in this regard; it is not intended to be "proof" for anything. Just something to consider.

Anyway, one lesson we should learn is that when a person sins and rejects the truth of God, THEN some of the wisdom and the understanding the person may have had until then will be lost! True wisdom is very closely linked to living in the full integrity of our hearts. And Solomon's statements in the Book of Ecclesiastes should drive this home very forcefully.

It is actually very much like what has happened in our age, over the past few years in the Worldwide Church of God.

Take the case of those people who became a part of God's Church 20 and more years ago, but who have now accepted all of the heretical teachings that the Worldwide Church of God is espousing. Look at the books and the articles that such people are now writing, and the way they try to explain the Scriptures in their writings. In many cases they are contradicting the things they themselves wrote many years ago. And the unsound reasoning in their present writings is easy to see.

When you read the things they now write, or when you hear the things they now say, you cannot help but ask: "Don't they understand any more? Have they REALLY lost it all?" And the sad answer is: "Yes, they HAVE lost it all." The understanding these people once had they have rejected; and now they have lost

it. This you can find demonstrated time and again with those people who have accepted the heretical new teachings of WCG, and the same thing is demonstrated equally clearly in the Book of Ecclesiastes, regarding the person of Solomon.

So lesson #1 is: when we compromise with the truth of God, then our minds will be affected and we will lose some of the understanding that we had before we compromised.

2) Next, Solomon's purpose (i.e. how to get the most out of this life) probably reflects what MOST people would like to know ... what CAN we do to achieve the greatest amount of joy and happiness? And MOST people in this world today would be inclined to look for the answer to this question in the same areas where Solomon looked for the answer ... fame, fortune, riches, power, prominence, unlimited physical resources, access to all the physical pleasures this life has to offer, etc..

But the more you strive to achieve happiness and joy and excitement, the less likely you are to actually end up being happy and fulfilled! As long as we are selfishly motivated to "GET" happiness, the more it will elude us. As the Apostle Paul explained, quoting the words of Jesus Christ:

I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE. (Acts 20:35)

True happiness and contentment actually come from GIVING and not from getting. Solomon looked in the wrong direction for joy and fulfillment, and with his own life he never managed to get onto the right track. His pursuit of happiness took him further and further away from the real answer.

Now God knew that multiple millions of people would follow in Solomon's footsteps, seeking happiness in the areas where Solomon looked for it. And God included this Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible to teach us that selfishness only leads to frustration and misery and even bitterness! When Solomon had done it all, HE WAS A BITTER OLD MAN. Yes, he was! Remember what he said in Ecclesiastes 7:26:

And I FIND MORE BITTER THAN DEATH the woman, whose heart [is] snares and nets, [and] her hands [as] bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. (Ecclesiastes 7:26)

"More bitter than death"?? We are dealing with a very bitter man!

He is speaking about many of his own wives! He was bitter towards many of those 1000 women he had married. He felt that he couldn't really trust a single one of them, as the next two verses make quite clear. Notice verse 28:

WHICH YET MY SOUL SEEKETH, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those HAVE I NOT FOUND. (Ecclesiastes 7:28)

Notice that he was "SEEKING" something, but he never found it. He didn't understand that it never works when you "seek" characteristics in other people which YOU YOURSELF ought to be developing and putting into practice. It never works when someone, who is unfaithful and unreliable himself, looks for OTHER PEOPLE who will be faithful and reliable. Unfaithfulness attracts unfaithfulness, but it drives away faithfulness. Similarly, selfishness, once it is correctly perceived by others, will drive faithful and unselfish and reliable people away from us! But it will attract those who have the same motivation as we

do.

When we correctly understand the Book of Ecclesiastes, then we find that at that point in time Solomon was a disappointed and a bitter man (Ecclesiastes 7:26), who was still seeking something he had never been able to find (Ecclesiastes 7:28), who was so selfishly motivated that he hated the thought of leaving his wealth and his possessions to his own son (Ecclesiastes 2:18), whose view of old age was unbelievably negative (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8), and who was unwilling to accept any correction (Ecclesiastes 4:13).

Let me give you an analogy.

Let's suppose you are a parent with teenage children, and you want to teach your children about the evils of misusing alcohol. You could take several different approaches. For example, you can teach your children what is the right and moderate use of alcohol; you can explain what God tells us about the use of alcohol; you can even threaten to punish severely any misuse of alcohol; you can set the correct example regarding the use of alcohol; etc.. All of these things may be helpful in teaching the right approach to this subject.

But here with the Book of Ecclesiastes GOD HAS TAKEN A DIFFERENT APPROACH. Instead of doing any of the above things, what God has done is take us downtown early on a Sunday morning, to where a drunk is lying in filth and vomit outside the backdoor of a bar. He is trying to stagger to his feet. As he does, you recognize to your horror that it is actually someone who used to live in your own neighbourhood, someone you had always looked up to and respected as an honourable and responsible citizen. But a few years ago he had just disappeared from the scene. As this drunk also recognizes you, he seems totally oblivious to the state he is in, and he addresses you as if he still had that same position of honour and respect ... but his speech is somewhat incoherent, and most of what he says doesn't really make sense. You are overcome with feelings of empathy and compassion because you realize that the man's mind has been blown for good, and there is nothing you can do to help him regain his sanity. Then God leads you a short distance away, while the drunk continues to talk to himself ...

... AND THEN GOD EXPLAINS THE EVILS OF THE MISUSE OF ALCOHOL TO YOU!

THEN God points out to you that this is the ultimate destination for those who misuse alcohol and who use drugs. God points out to you that IT IS ALL A MATTER OF CAUSE AND EFFECT. However, God expects you yourself to understand that the things the drunk had said to you are not necessarily correct or true ... that much you should be able to discern for yourself.

Now this is only an analogy. I do NOT mean to imply that Solomon had become an uncontrolled alcoholic. But here is the point:

Solomon had set his mind to seek happiness, and in the process he had lived very selfishly. What better way could God show us the ultimate results of a selfish way of life than to do so through the words of someone who had practised selfishness "to the hilt"? What better way to illustrate the miserable and negative and critical perspective of life, which selfishness inevitably produces, than to present the words of someone who has diligently practised selfishness? What better way to teach us that selfishness makes people very inconsistent (there are no absolutes regarding good and bad for such people; it really always depends on where THEIR interests happen to lie) than to present a real-life example?

So here is lesson #2: Through the Book of Ecclesiastes God has given us a vivid example of what selfishness, if carried to the extreme, will do to the human mind ... by letting such a selfish person speak for himself. Solomon's own words PROVE that selfishness makes people utterly miserable. Selfishness

NEVER works! Solomon's own words DEMONSTRATING this point are far more effective than the mere assertion that selfishness is bad for us.

AND THAT IS WHY GOD INCLUDED THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES, with its wrong views and all, IN THE BIBLE! God has given us very plain and clear statements in the rest of the Bible to show us exactly what is right in His sight. The words of Jesus Christ and the words of converted men like the Apostle Paul are quite clear regarding life, its merits and its potential.

It is quite clear that God does NOT want us to focus on the here and now. It is quite clear that our hope does indeed lie BEYOND this physical life. It is quite clear that God wants us to learn to DENY ourselves. It is quite clear that the development of godly character requires us to exercise RESTRAINTS. It is quite clear that ALL is NOT "vanity" or futility; there is an "incredible human potential" which God built into our human existence. It is quite clear that we human beings are not at all like "beasts".

And it should be quite clear that Solomon's OPINIONS in all of these areas do NOT reflect the mind of God; that they are in fact contrary to the mind of God. Thus it should be quite clear to see that this Book of Ecclesiastes was written by someone who did NOT have the Holy Spirit guiding his mind. It should be clear that this was written by someone who was guided by the spirit of this present world.

God WANTS us to understand how selfish people, who reject God's ways, view life. God wants us to understand that selfishness makes people miserable and very negative. God wants us to understand that the end result of selfishness is a SPIRIT OF HOPELESSNESS. That is a part of learning to correctly "divide" the word of truth.

That's why God included the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible.

SOME LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Briefly, here are some lessons we can learn from this book:

- 1) Sin always makes people negative. Obedience to God, on the other hand, makes people positive about life. Solomon didn't have a fraction of the trials that the Apostle Paul had to face; yet Paul was positive and Solomon was negative.
- 2) Getting everything you desire is not the best way to achieve happiness in life. Happiness also includes self-denial and self-control. We talk about people who get everything they desire as being "spoiled rotten" ... and usually they are not really happy.
- 3) Giving a person perfect wisdom is not the best way to achieve God's goal. On the spirit level God gave great wisdom to the one who became Satan, and on the human level God gave great wisdom to Solomon. Yet Satan rebelled against God, and Solomon knowingly compromised with idolatry. The best way to achieve God's purpose is revealed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28:

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, [are called] (1 Corinthians 1:26)
- 4) Without faithful obedience great wisdom is totally useless. It simply becomes corrupted.
- 5) Ecclesiastes shows what happens to the mind of a person, who knowingly rejects the truth of God in order to compromise:

- A) There is still a certain mechanical understanding of much truth.
 - B) The person does not really comprehend what he has lost in understanding and in wisdom.
 - C) The viewpoint becomes very negative and basically hopeless.
 - D) The use of religious language, with just enough correct statements thrown in, can fool many people into thinking that they are dealing with a converted man.
- 6) Ecclesiastes gives us the opportunity to compare God's wisdom and perspective (as revealed in the rest of the Bible!) with the best that worldly wisdom can come up with (as revealed and expounded in Ecclesiastes). It is a vivid example of 1 Corinthians 3:19:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. (1 Corinthians 3:19)

Solomon can actually SEE certain truths (e.g. the need to fear and to obey God), and yet at the same time he can come up with such dumb conclusions (e.g. praising death and still-births and aborted fetuses).

7) A vital lesson to learn is that when we are dealing with people who have great worldly wisdom, then we should NOT ASSUME that they are automatically practising what they preach. They may do so, but that isn't necessarily the case.

Well, that should give you some perspective on the book.

With this background in mind, why not make a point of now reading the whole Book of Ecclesiastes for yourself? As I mentioned earlier, it is quite short, with only 222 verses. As you go through the book, very likely many other points will catch your attention which I have not discussed in this article. But you should be able to see all of Solomon's statements in their correct context.

So have a happy Bible study.

Frank W. Nelte