

## Ecclesiastes Resumed (Part Sixteen)

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It was not until I purposely took a break from the series of Ecclesiastes during the Days of Unleavened Bread, that I realized that we have been going through a sub theme that it is just below the surface. It is never named but it is nonetheless there, especially in chapters 4-6. Perhaps if I could put a modern name to this theme it would help bring a bit of clarity. It is materialism.

Solomon is showing that materialism is a poor source for seeking satisfaction in one's life. Materialism is the modern title given for the ancient philosophical doctrine that physical well being and material possessions constitute the highest good in life.

Here in this western world, our cultures have been virtually overwhelmed by this thinking. We will make a quick overview of the first six chapters. Recall in chapter 1, Solomon essentially states that life is meaningless. That is his starting point for this thesis which ends with him declaring that the whole duty of man is to fear God and to keep His commandments, not the concepts of materialism which drives this world.

He did a 180-degree turn as he moved through Ecclesiastes. Thus in chapter 2, he immediately launches into what he concluded regarding his works of building material things like palaces, houses, and gardens, irrigation systems, and seeking even greater wealth than he already had. What was his conclusion? He says all of these material achievements were nothing but vanity, a grasping after wind.

He said that there was no real profit that truly added to life's quality, no lasting fulfillment. He then proceeds his exploration into wine and entertainment, and these are simply another form of materialism, ways of pleasing the flesh. He concluded them as being folly, a mad pursuit.

Chapter 3 seemingly deviates from this theme but the deviation is purposeful, it fits right into the theme. He is really planting a seed for further, wider, and greater understanding—a true foundation for those who he is addressing to build upon. He shows that God, though unseen, is actively involved and working in His creation, working out His purpose.

God shows us in this chapter that He has already given us a priceless gift. He has put eternity into our hearts in order to remind us that His working involves us in an eternal,

spiritual—not a material—purpose. He is telling us that our lives have a different foundation and direction.

In chapters 4-6 he is showing us that satisfaction in life is produced or given as a result of gifts given by God, who is intimately involved with us in working out His purpose, as we seek Him. Thus there is a semi-conclusion as we reach the halfway point in this book.

Satisfaction in life is not derived from wealth, status in society, or any material thing. Material things can give pleasure, and they are good, and that pleasure is good, but like everything physical, the pleasure is momentary. It is the eternal, spiritual relationship with our Creator which has begun, and in which God gifts us with what is needed to use our God-given life wisely, that brings the balanced and sustained measure of satisfaction. To make right use of this life in glorifying God is our goal, it is the righteous pursuit.

This morning I was looking over my notes and I decided to go on the Internet and see what Wikipedia says about materialism. I never made it to Wikipedia because when I clicked on the Google button, it took me to the right page but it took me directly to an article on *materialism* which was posted on the sixth of this month. This is hot off the press! I will read some of it to you.

It comes from the Manchester Guardian. It was written by a lady by the name of Tanya Gold. What she is doing is giving an overview, a book report, of an entire study that was done by numerous people, but put together into a book by one Graham Music. He is the author of this. He is a psychotherapist, and he has written a book called, *The Good Life: Well Being in the New Science of Altruism, Selfishness, and Immorality*. She goes on in her article, "The study confirms through the use of data collected by scientists over the past forty years what we have all long suspected from anecdote and our own eyes: the materialistic tend to be unhappy, those with material goods will remain unhappy, and the market feeds on unhappiness."

That is really interesting. It fits right into Ecclesiastes, especially chapters 4-6. Materialism absolutely *cannot* satisfy people. Those people chasing after material goods end up really in bad shape, as this study goes on. "It is an outreach program [that is what the study calls materialism], for personal and political desolation and it is so far an outstanding success." She does not mean the materialism is an outstanding success, she means that the program to lure people into materialism is an outstanding success.

"Peel away the images of the gaudy objects and find instead a condition," she means a

mental condition. Continuing with the quote: "A study at Berkeley University, quoted by Music, provides an answer to the question of why wealthy politicians act the way they do." This is really interesting, if we catch it. They can never satisfy people, they can never satisfy themselves, because they are materialistic to the core and all of their programs are materialistic.

She continues: "Why wealthy politicians act as they do, although I do not doubt they delude themselves as to their motives. The higher up the social class ranking people are, the less pro-social, charitable, and emphatically they behave. Consistently, those who were less rich, show more empathy and more of a wish to help others."

"Tim Kasser [I do not know who he is, but he is a psychology professor at Knox College Illinois], notes that if you love material objects you are less likely to love people, and of course the planet. The connection between the rise of materialism and indifference to the environment is not coincidental, nor is the connection between the rise of materialism and growing inequality and fear of the stranger which expresses itself in a despicable loathing for the roma." I do not know what the "roma" is.

What they are saying is it produces the opposite of what those involved in materialism hope it will produce. It works in reverse. Again quoting: "Money is a brutalizing agent and a paranoiac drug [Get this illustration. It is as though they are describing what money has the power to do to people. Remember the word "drug"; it is as though it is hanging over our heads.], and so it drips down, an infection, swallowing happiness and peace, and inequality leads to an erosion of trust between people, and when you couch a premise in the language of the market, people become more suspicious and less kindly. This is potentially disastrous as public services are sold and patients find themselves transformed into consumers."

I will end on this note. "Even the language corrupts. Advertising ratchets up the stress and places us in imagined competition with each other. [This is what the study is showing.] It encourages yet more materialism which follows the paths of drug addiction. It offers a false promise of ecstasy and it does not work. The more we spend on unnecessary material goods, the less happy we are. Mental illness, narcissism, and dissatisfaction instead follow."

Again quoting the study, "Those with more materialistic values, consistently have worse relationships with more conflicts, Music writes. This is significant if the perceived shift toward more material values in the West is accurate. We cannot say we were not warned."

This is a report from real life and what they are finding, but it agrees with the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes. Materialism does not cut it, a relationship with God is what mankind needs.

The previous sermon on chapter 6 ended with five questions that seemed posed by a person called of God but who was giving justifications for not making progress within his calling. The questions are somewhat difficult but they are not unanswerable. There is one overall response that covers all five questions. The person needs, as we might say in our day, to get hold of himself, face the spiritual realities of his life, quit making excuses, be a man and face up to the demands of one's calling by setting right goals, and overcoming.

We will get restarted here with five bottom-line realities for us because it is possible that we could fit into this scenario. First, fully accepting that life is God's gift. This we need, fully accepting that life itself is God's gift. Second, He desires that we spend it involved with Him using our faith in preparation for an eternal relationship with Him in His family Kingdom. Those two are absolutes. God is the giver of life and God wants us to live in a relationship with Him. Third, the fruit of active involvement in life with Him will be the enjoyable satisfaction in life despite life's trials. Fourth, by faith actively seeking God in this life functions to produce the "above the sun" life. Fifth, a person of faith must understand, if there is no Kingdom of God and no purpose being worked out, then nothing matters except for materialism. This is the broad description of the "under the sun" life lived in the world.

They do not believe in God, they do not believe in His purpose, and so nothing matters except what is going on at the moment. That is the under the sun approach, it is materialism, or it can be called humanism. This is the mindset that the intellectual and ruling elite in this nation are in and they are rapidly sliding ever more deeply into because there is no fear of the Eternal God for them to answer to.

**Revelation 11:8** And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.

As you start to read that verse you could say, boy that really fits Babylon, but that last phrase, "Where also our Lord was crucified" pinpoints that what God intends we understand is Jerusalem. I want to identify so that you know that we are dealing with Jerusalem here, and Jerusalem is symbolically being used in this context as representing the entirety of the Israelitish people, that is, it is the capital city as God

looks at things of the Israelitish people. The Sodom-Jerusalem parallel portrays the mindset, the worldview of the Israelitish citizenry as being similar to what lead God to destroy Sodom and Egypt in times past.

We will make a connection in Ezekiel with Jerusalem. Ezekiel's time when he wrote this, and also with our time, because there is a parallel here that reaches all the way down to our time.

**Ezekiel 16:48-51** "As I live," says the Lord God, "neither your sister Sodom nor her daughters have done as you and your daughters have done. [The relationship between people in Israel, Judah, and God is similar to the kind of relationship that people were having in Sodom just before God destroyed it but they are doing worse than Sodom.] Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy, and they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit. Samaria [represents the northern ten tribes of Israel. Now what we are reading includes Sodom, Judah, and the Israelitish people here in the west, the whole nation] did not commit half of your sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they, and have justified your sisters by all the abominations which you have done."

God is saying, Samaria, Israel, Jerusalem, and Judah are making Sodom look good by comparison, and yet He destroyed them, blew them off the face of the earth. It could be that this indictment had come down on the Israelitish people, not because we are committing worse sins, in the sense, as the Sodomites were, but rather because God's expectations because of what He gave us are not being met and He wanted more from them, because of the advantages that He had given them—to who much is given the more is required. We have no excuse the way Sodom did. They did not know God at all. We should know better. So, Judah and Israel are both included in this indictment.

This is the mindset that we live in. Maybe it has not reached that peak yet here in the United States or Britain, but we are moving rapidly in that direction and I cannot see that the kind of mindset that is directing things within the nation is going to last much longer at this level. It is going to sink further down and we are going to see things worse than they are at this time.

The fruit of the mindset in Israel is of moral and ethical depravity that exceeds even that of Sodom. This is the environment that we find ourselves living in. We cannot allow

ourselves to become apathetic to what is going on around us, because if we do it will suck us in, because there is very much that is going on in this nation that, though it is evil, has an appeal for the carnal mind that might remain in us as well—so we could be attracted by what they are doing, what they are involved in.

The dominant and most obvious theme of the next two chapters in Ecclesiastes is wisdom. The term appears fourteen times in chapters 7-9. To the modern mind wisdom seems to have evolved into a philosophical abstraction, thus it is very hard to nail down as something concrete and useful for daily life. However, the Bible makes strong efforts to show us that the ancient Israelites perceived it as a practical mental quality, strongly associated with skill, and thus most strongly associated with skill in godly living.

Skill indicates a high degree of proficiency, expertise that is demonstrated in some field. In Proverbs it appears to be a fruit of knowledge and understanding which is then worked into a highly toned expertise. That, as the Bible clearly shows, gives us more credit than we deserve. It tends to give the impression that we have worked things into a very helpful skill. That is not entirely biblical.

Some people in life do accomplish much, and we do indeed play a role in producing wisdom for ready use in our lives, but in order to achieve the very highest level of this skill regarding living life, one must be working with truth, and this is exactly where God and the Word of God becomes exceedingly important. We will turn to a bottom line as to the biblical source of wisdom and we will find that as we continue to look at it it fits right in to the theme of these chapters of Ecclesiastes.

**James 1:1-8** James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

The bottom line regarding wisdom is that it is a gift from God specifically given to negotiate the trials of Christian life. Which means it is given to make the very best practical uses of all the other God-given gifts, to make the very best of His calling, thus

glorifying Him before this world.

Make note where this word and this instruction appears in the book of James. It is in the first eight verses, and it is the foundation of the major subject of this entire epistle: it is wisdom, and where it comes from. It states that this wisdom is from above, it must be asked for, and by James' statement God guarantees it liberally without demanding what we did with the last gift that He gave us. Sometimes we do not use God's gifts well, but wisdom is so important to success in God's way of life, that He gives it liberally without reprimanding us for how we misused what He gave us in the past.

Please turn to Matthew 7, and remember this in relation to the gift that we are talking about here, it is a gift from God. I want you to see that God does not just pour it into our heads like a funnel. We have something to do with receiving it and making the very best use of it, analyzing it, comparing it, turning it upside down, looking at it frontward and backward, and developing it.

**Matthew 7:7-9** "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"

God is willing. He is able and wants to give us good gifts. We will go back to the book of James, this time we are going to go to chapter 3.

**James 3:13-18** Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

I want you to take notice of the characteristics that James is describing here. What he is describing here are facets of what is contained within wisdom. Wisdom is not just one thing, it is many things combined into one word—wisdom. We will look at this closer. God-given wisdom produces good conduct, God-given wisdom is pure, it is peaceable,

gentle, impartial. It is neither stubborn nor hardheaded, but merciful, not hypocritical.

We will connect this to something else. Do not these terms sound very much like the fruits of the Holy Spirit given in Galatians 5? Let me tell you something that should be readily understood: choosing to conduct one's life according to God's truth, and the fruits of God's Spirit, is indeed exactly what biblical wisdom is. Remember I said, wisdom is practical, it is a practical skill in living, and it consists of all these wonderful gifts of God. That sounds very much like the fruits of God's Spirit.

What is he telling us? There is a conclusion that we can read from this, that is, to choose to follow the fruits of God's Spirit no matter what the situation is, that is what wisdom is. That is not hard to understand, but to choose to act that way, to conduct life that way, is not always easy to do, but it is *always* the right thing to do, no matter the circumstance. That is wisdom.

We will go further, go back the book of Proverbs. I hope that you are beginning to see that wisdom is one term, but it is a multifaceted term.

**Proverbs 1:1-7** The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding, to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion—A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, to understand a proverb and an enigma, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

I very much like the simple comment that the Soncino commentary makes regarding verse 2, where it says, to know wisdom and instruction. It says, "The aim of Proverbs is for a man to know." Know what? Wisdom. "You are learning that wisdom is not one simple thing, it is a whole collection of things. His first duty is to obtain a knowledge of wisdom, then it is hoped he will allow it to rule his life. No sagacity, abstract learning, or philosophical speculation is intended, but an understanding of the principles which control and direct human living at its highest and best."

The Hebrew term translated wisdom in these verses basically indicates a broad skill in a discipline, and what the skill specifically is depends upon what the discipline is in any given context. For example, in the Bible, the term wisdom describes the artistry of the craftsman who worked on the Tabernacle. That is in Exodus.



In another, the word wisdom is used to describe the wits of a seasoned mariner, that is, his skill in steering a boat through a storm. It is also used of the administrative ability of a king, or the advice of a councilor. In each case all of these terms are described as wisdom.

In other words, the term wisdom in Hebrew is a collective, it is more than one specific quality. All of the factors mentioned here in Proverbs 1:1-7 are part and parcel of the highest form of the most important skill that mankind can achieve and that is skill in living God's way.

It takes knowledge, it takes understanding, it takes justice, judgment, equity, prudence, discretion, learning. Are you beginning to get the point here? Wisdom is in reality very complex, because it collects all of these terms to use when it is appropriate that is the hard part. That is why we have to have practice, practice learning it, but we are already on the path to having it. Always remember, never forget, it is a gift from God. He is the only one who can really give it, because it is a part of Him, and it comes as a gift as we go through life's trials and learn this works but this does not work, So we have to go through all kinds of experiences in order to begin to pile up the knowledge that comes from these experiences in living God's way of life.

So we collect them, and we put them into our minds and the next time that happens, this is what I am going to do. Are you beginning to get the point? If we can tie this down, to what wisdom is, to one simple term, it is skill in living God's way.

God's way takes almost a lifetime to learn. This is why God needs the time to work with us, because wisdom is accumulated as a result of His being part of our life, as a result of our having His Spirit, and because we allow Him to work with us so that these things can be developed within us, and they become part of our minds, part of our character, part of the fruit of our life. Do not forget that simple thing that I gave you before, that is, to act within the framework of the fruits of God's Spirit is always wisdom, regardless of the circumstance. It is wisdom to love, it is wisdom to be kind, it is wisdom to be patient, it is wisdom to be honorable, and on and on it goes until it is impressed upon our minds, and becomes part of our character, and is used in everyday life.

All of the factors mentioned here in Proverbs are part and parcel of the highest form of the most important skill that mankind can achieve, and that is skill in living God's way of life. Verse 7 shows wisdom is formed atop a God-given faith, the fear of the Lord, and a budding love for Him and His purpose. It also consists of knowledge, understanding, prudence, insight, discernment, and discretion. Thus the entire package is skill, or wisdom, used in living life in a godly way.

Mankind has a problem. That problem is the carnal mind which, because of contact with the world and the deceits of Satan which drive it, resists the very thing it needs most—God's truth. God's Word contains the instruction and wisdom man needs to make the most of life. So if he does not have God's truth, no wisdom is going to be built, that is, godly wisdom.

What I want us to learn at this point is that wisdom is rather complex, but it is an attainable virtue. It is complex because it consists of so many factors. It is not just one virtue but the sum of many virtues, and this is why one must be patiently persistent in seeking, and thus asking God frequently for it.