

# Interpretive Paper on Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

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## Background on the Book of Ecclesiastes, Including Genre

The book of Ecclesiastes (or in Hebrew Koheleth<sup>1</sup>) is a somewhat unique book in the Bible. It is written in the genre of wisdom (with some poetic illustrations) much like other books in the Old Testament; however, it is different in the way the information is presented. The book of Proverbs, for instance, (which is specifically a proverbial wisdom book) presents a lists of “do’s and don’ts” along with consequences that are often associated with these actions, at least as observed though the eyes of the writer. Whereas the book of Ecclesiastes is a speculation wisdom book, much like the book of Job, except that Ecclesiastes appears in the form of a monologue throughout<sup>2</sup>.

Most parts of Ecclesiastes appear as musings of the author on the meaning of life - why are we here, and what really matters. Furthermore, large portions of the book appear to paint a rather pessimistic picture of the meaning of life and any hope of fair justice, at least on Earth. Issues related to value of wisdom, the merits of pleasure, normal repetitions in the cycle of life, and human obligations to God are all explored in the book. But in the midst of the reflections of some of the injustices and worthlessness of much of the activities here on Earth, the author also sprinkles words of hope throughout in which a general theme emerges that a life lived consistent with God’s intentions is the only thing that matters. It is essential in understanding the book of Ecclesiastes that no single verse or passage be taken out of context. The book consistently hits upon the themes of vanity and futility.

As with all books in the Bible, proper interpretation of the passages in Ecclesiastes must include an understanding of the author, or “Preacher”, as he is referred to in the text<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *The Pulpit Commentary*, Volume 9; Edited by Spence and Exell; Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan

<sup>2</sup> The Nelson Study Bible

<sup>3</sup> The term Preacher is found in the NKJV. Other versions use different terms, such as “teacher” found in the NIV. This paper uses the terms “Preacher” and “author” throughout to refer to Solomon.

The book was most likely written by King Solomon.<sup>4</sup> As the son of King David, Solomon had indeed been blessed. God had allowed him to choose his gift and he chose wisdom. Along with his wisdom, he acquired extraordinary wealth and power as well. His kingdom stretched eastward to the Euphrates, westward to the Mediterranean, and southward to Egypt – approximately 120,000 square miles<sup>5</sup>.

Yet despite the blessings he received, King Solomon fell away from God during his life and participated in idol worship. Also, contrary to God’s instructions, he married foreign women. Solomon indulged himself in excesses, including 700 wives and 300 concubines. And although he had built the temple to the one true God of Israel, at his wives’ request he built places of honors and altars for idols of the Moabites and Ammonites.

Ecclesiastes represents the honesty and regret with which Solomon looked back over his life and the lessons that he felt he had learned. He explored the ways he had looked for happiness in his life – wisdom, pleasure, power, material possessions – and the results that each of these ways had brought – grief, sorrow, vanity, and pessimism. Although the point is debated, many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written toward the end of Solomon’s life and represents repentance and a return to the one true God. Through pessimism appears to be expressed in some portions of the book, the book returns to the themes that gifts from God are to be enjoyed, and, as expressed in Chapter 12 verse 13, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man’s all.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The general consensus is that Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, although there is some disagreement among scholars. Those who believe Solomon did not write the book point to passages, such as verse 1:12 which they claim implies that the author “was” king (Solomon remained king until his death), and verse 1:16 which they believe indicates that the author served as King much later in Jerusalem’s history. This paper is based on the premise that Solomon was indeed the author. [Sources: The Nelson Study Bible; The Book of Ecclesiastes Explained.]

<sup>5</sup> Source: *The Book of Ecclesiastes Explained*; by James M. Macdonald; Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Inc.; Minneapolis, Minnesota

<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise noted

## Passages 2:18-23

This paper will discuss one of the passages in Ecclesiastes where Solomon explores the rather practical question of what happens to all you have worked for when you die. In verse 18, the Preacher notes that as he reflected on his life he hated all his labor. One of the key themes in the passage is the last part of verse 18 in which he notes that he must leave it to the one who will come after him. Solomon had achieved great things during his life – if the measure was power, prestige, and possessions. He had overseen work on the glorious temple and presided over a vast empire. However, when he considered the long-term fruits of his labor, he realized that he could only enjoy them for a short time. Macdonald states, “He could live only a short time and superintend and enjoy them.”<sup>7</sup>

The Pulpit Commentary notes that this was the first mortifying thought for the Preacher – “that he but gathers for a successor.” Solomon was uniquely qualified to make such an observation. Rather than working for power and possessions his entire life and only acquiring them in old age, he had inherited them. He enjoyed an expansion of his kingdom during his younger years, and even though he enjoyed the pleasures, he still lamented that all he had worked for would be turned over to someone else at his passing. Such is the mentality of someone who is constantly seeking material wealth and is never satisfied. No matter what they have, their concern is how to keep it, and as this passage represents, the realization that they cannot keep it after death is disturbing to them.

Verse 19 explores the second part of the question: Namely, now that the Preacher has accepted that he will have to pass the fruits of his labor on to someone else, what will that person do with them. In this verse the Preacher asks:

*“Who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun.”*

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<sup>7</sup> The Book of Ecclesiastes Explained

The Preacher further notes that this is vanity, or as the New International Version states, “This too is meaningless.” This is a pragmatic reflection on his legacy. Not only will he have to leave it to someone else, he implies he is not sure whom that will be or even if they will be wise or foolish. Obviously, the fruits of his labor would be more secure in the hands of a wise successor, who had the ability to govern over them in such a way as to build on what already existed. A foolish successor, however, may govern in such a way as to not expand, or even worse - lose, the fruits of his labor.

The Pulpit Commentary notes that second mortifying thought is that the Preacher will have to leave his “things” in the hands of a successor, and it is quite uncertain what character the successor will be, and what he may do with his inheritance. He may make prudent use of his inheritance, or he may in a very short time scatter it to the winds<sup>8</sup>.

This reflection also allows a window into the thoughts of the author on control. Any control he has over his labor while he is alive is completely surrendered at his death. And as valuable as his power and possessions are to him now, they may not even survive one more generation.

In verse 20, similar to verse 18, the author states that he turned his heart and despaired of all the labor in which he had toiled. This represents the musings of a man who has been focused only on the acquisition of power and riches on earth. Then he realizes the value of such things in the end. In verse 21, the Pastor adds another dimension to his thoughts by noting that he must leave his heritage to a man that has not labored for it.

Macdonald notes that even though Solomon was leaving his inheritance to his own son, he is still lamenting what may eventually happen to his kingdom. Verses 22 and 23 ask what a man has for all his labors, then notes that for all a man’s work, his days are sorrowful, his work is burdensome, and he has no rest, even at night. This refrain emphasizes an additional point of the passage that those who are obsessed with acquiring power, wealth and possessions, not only have to give it up eventually, but they also suffer

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<sup>8</sup> The Pulpit Commentary

in the process of acquiring it. This message seems to be a bit out of sequence, but the conclusion is clear.

A wise man can work hard, acquire wealth and power, and then becomes captive to it because he wants to keep it. Furthermore, he will eventually lose it anyway because he cannot take anything with him when he dies. Macdonald notes that the Preacher is describing someone who is so intent on worldly possessions that they work harder only to find themselves loaded with more cares and perplexities and nights of unrest.

Taking this passage altogether as a whole, I would make one further observation before going forward to discuss this passage in the context of the book. I believe the Preacher is speaking specifically of the mentality behind the acquisition of possessions. If the sole focus of a man or woman is to acquire earthly possessions, ironically they may end up being captive to their possessions and ultimately miserable. Furthermore, I believe this passage, and the book in general, stands in contrast to other parts of the Old Testament where wealth is seen as a reward from God for faithful service.

In this section, the Preacher notes that wealth can be more of a problem to be concerned about than a blessing to be thankful for. There are three sorrows in the mentality of the focused pursuit of acquiring wealth<sup>9</sup>. First is the sorrow of getting the riches, which is summed up in verse 23. All the actions needed to build wealth can bring with them unhappiness, worry, and concern. Second is the sorrow in keeping the wealth, as wealth comes with anxiety about losing it. And the third sorrow is the sorrow of parting with riches. This is the lament of the Preacher throughout this passage. You have worked hard to acquire riches; then you must leave them for someone who never worked for them and may instead squander them.

This can be a cycle of misery, one works to acquire riches (suffering through the process), then one acquires them and has to worry about keeping them, then one realizes

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<sup>9</sup> The Pulpit Commentary

that he or she cannot hold onto them forever so they worry about what will become of what they have acquired.

### **Immediate Context**

The passage actually starts with verse 17 in which the Preacher laments that he hates life because the work done is distressing and is “grasping for the wind.” This actually follows several verses in which the Preacher comes to the same conclusion about wisdom. He ponders the question of how valuable it is to be wise instead of foolish. And although he comes to the conclusion that it is better to be wise than foolish here on Earth (Chapter 2 verse 13 notes that “*wisdom excels folly as light exceeds darkness*”), but that the same outcome happens to both the wise and foolish in the end, that is, they die and leave behind everything they have. This is similar to the conclusion he reaches regarding work in passages 18 through 23. Although the author does not present this information as a comparison, that is, he does not directly compare those who work hard and acquire power and possessions with those who do not, the implication is that no matter what you do you have to leave it behind for someone else. Tangible riches, like wisdom, do not transcend this life.

The final three verses following this passage draw the conclusion that man should just enjoy their riches while they have them, basically eat, drink, and be merry, because this “*is from the hand of God.*” In other words, since you have acquired the wealth, you should enjoy it on Earth, because you cannot take it with you, and you may leave it to someone foolish who will just squander it. But it is important to note that this segment concludes with a reference to God and the desire to acknowledge that God is the giver of good things.

The final verse in the chapter, verse 26, states that God gives wisdom and knowledge to those who are good in his sight, but gives the work of gathering and collecting wealth to those who are not good in his sight so they can hand it over to the ones who please God. However, this observation is not meant to be absolute and the author later acknowledges

in chapter 8 that sometimes just men suffer the fate reserved for the wicked and vice versa.

### **Larger Context With in the Book**

Some central themes run throughout the book of Ecclesiastes that are consistent with this section. The theme that the things we admire on Earth, such as wisdom, prestige, and riches are temporary is seen in this passage and throughout the book. Also, the mentality that the best thing to do with riches is to enjoy them, rather than worry about what will ultimately happen to them is seen throughout. But one of the most important points of the book involves the importance of living a life consistent with God's commands, as that is the only true path to contentment. Chapter 12 verse 13 notes that the conclusion to the whole matter is to "*Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.*"

### **Context With in the Bible**

The theme of the subject passage that riches are temporary and not to be thought of as the end-in-and-of themselves is not unique to Ecclesiastes. Solomon's father echoed the theme in Psalm 39:6 when he wrote "*Surely every man walks about like a shadow; surely they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them.*" In the parable of the rich fool found in Luke 12, Christ noted that when the rich man's soul was required of him, God said to him "*whose will those things be which you have provided?*" Christ further noted so is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. Also, in Matthew 6:19-21 Christ advised his followers to not lay us treasures on Earth, but lay them up in heaven, "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

### **Applications for Today**

The general theme of the subject passage is as applicable today as it was when it was written. I would even argue that this passage is particularly relevant in contemporary

America, where correlations can be made in the pursuit of wealth and power and increases in conditions such as depression and drug use. Solomon spoke of the acquisition of wealth and the realization that it would just go to someone else eventually anyway. Obviously, that is still true today. He further spoke about not being able to control what happened after he died, regarding whether or not the wealth would go to a wise man or a foolish man. Even with contracts and common law practices of inheritance rights, someone cannot control what will happen to their former possessions once that person is dead.

Even if the property goes to someone of their choosing, they cannot guarantee that the decisions made by the successor regarding the estate are always going to be consistent with the desires of the deceased. The offspring may inherit the name and the wealth, but not the prowess to keep it. The Pulpit Commentary notes that the descendants of the great in many instances fall into obscurity and contempt. Solomon further notes that there are burdens and sorrows associated with acquiring wealth.

So how can we use this advise from one of the greatest sages of all time in our world today? I believe it starts with our mentality as we go about trying to plan our lives. It is not necessarily a sin to work hard and try to build up some savings for the future, but one must always keep in mind their motivation and keep a balanced approach. There is certainly a line that can be crossed between a healthy work ethic and an obsession with work. There is a line that can be crossed regarding enjoying the fruits of your labor and the nice things God has allowed you to acquire, and becoming obsessed with material wealth.

We must keep a balance in our life and our mentality should always be set on achieving what the Lord would have us to achieve, and not obsessing over what we do not have. Also, like Solomon, we must realize where our hearts should be. Earthly treasures are temporary, and despite our hard work, may not even survive one additional generation. In contrast, heavenly treasures are eternal. A good application of how we can increase our heavenly treasures is to be good stewards of what God has given us on Earth. In

addition to eating and drinking and indulging in pleasures with our wealth (as the Preacher recommends), we should use our talents to help others.

Finally, we need to recognize the toll that obsession with power and wealth can bring. As the Preacher points out, obsession can bring sorrow, even if we are successful. Also, when taken in conjunction with other portions of the Bible, including the teachings of Christ, our energy will be placed where our priorities are. And if our priorities are focused only on Earthly treasures, that does not leave energy for us to pursue heavenly treasures and doing good on Earth for humanitarian reasons, as opposed to personal gain. So we must keep a balanced perspective on our plans for our life, and realize the conclusion that the Preacher notes, that fearing God and keeping his commandments is our all.