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Ecclesiastes and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Ecclesiastes and Work

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes brilliantly captures the toil and joy, fleeting success and unanswered questions that we all experience in our work. It is one of many Christian workers' favorite books of Bible, and its narrator — called the Teacher in most English translations — has a lot to say about work. Much of what he teaches is succinct, practical and smart. Anyone who has ever worked on a team can appreciate the value of a maxim such as, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil" (Ecclesiastes 4:9). Most of us spend the largest portion of our waking lives working, and we find affirmation when the Teacher says, "I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun" (Eccl. 8:15).

Yet the Teacher's picture of work is also deeply troubling. "I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after the wind" (Eccl. 2:11). The almost-overwhelming preponderance of negative observations about work threatens to swamp the reader. The Teacher opens with "vanity of vanities" (Eccl. 1:2) and ends with "all is vanity" (Eccl. 12:10). The words and phrases he repeats most often are "vanity," "a chasing after wind," "not find out," and "can't find out." Unless there is a larger perspective to temper his observations, Ecclesiastes can be a very dreary book indeed.

The task of making sense of the book as a whole is difficult. Does Ecclesiastes really portray work as vanity, or does the Teacher sift through the many vain ways of working to find a core set of meaningful ones? Or, to the contrary, are the many positive maxims and observations negated by an overall assessment of work as "a chasing after wind"? The answer depends in large part in how we approach the book.

One way to read Ecclesiastes is to take it as simply a tossed salad of observations about life, including work. Under this approach, the Teacher is primarily a realistic observer who reports the ups and downs of life as he encounters them. Each observation stands on its own as a bit of wisdom. If we draw useful advice from, say, "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil" (Eccl. 2:24), we need not be too concerned that it is followed shortly by, "This also is vanity and a

chasing after wind” (Eccl. 2:26).

The reader who wishes to take this approach is in good company. The majority of scholars today do not recognize an overarching argument in Ecclesiastes, and even among those who do, “there is hardly one commentator who agrees with another.”^[1] But there is something unsatisfying about such a piecemeal approach. We want to know, “What is the overall message of Ecclesiastes?” If we are to discover that, we must look for a structure to bring together the wide range of observations living side-by-side in the book.

We will follow the structure first proposed by Addison Wright in 1968, which divides the book into units of thought.^[2] Wright’s structure commends itself for three reasons: 1) it is based objectively on the repetition of key phrases in the text of Ecclesiastes, rather than on subjective interpretations of the content; 2) it is accepted by more scholars — admittedly still a tiny minority — than any other;^[3] and 3) it brings work-related topics to the foreground. We do not have time to reproduce Wright’s arguments, but we will indicate the repetitive phrases that delineate the units of thought he proposes. In the first half of the book, the phrase “a chasing after wind” marks the end of each unit. In the second half, the phrase “not find out” (or “who can find out?”) performs the same function. Wright’s structure will contribute directly to our overall understanding of the book.

There is another term, “under the sun,” which cannot escape our notice as we read Ecclesiastes. It occurs 29 times in the book, but nowhere else in the Bible.^[4] It is reminiscent of the term, “in the fallen world,” derived from Genesis 3, which describes the world in which God’s creation is still good, yet severely marred by ills. Why does the Teacher use this phrase so often? Does he mean to reinforce the pointlessness of work by conjuring an image of the sun circling endlessly across the sky while nothing ever changes? Or does he imagine there might be a world beyond the Fall, not “under the sun,” where work would not be in vain? It is a question worth keeping in mind as we read Ecclesiastes.

In contrast to human life under the sun, the Teacher gives us glimpses of God in heaven. Our toil is fleeting, but “whatever God does endures forever” (Eccl. 3:14). These glimpses begin to give us an understanding of the character of God, which, perhaps, will help us make sense of life. We will note what Ecclesiastes reveals about God’s character as aspects arise, then take a look at them together towards the end of the book.

In any case, Ecclesiastes makes a vital contribution to the theology of work through its honest, unvarnished look at the reality of work. Any thoughtful person who is engaged in their work, whether a follower of Christ or not, will connect with it. Its refreshing honesty opens the door for deep conversations about work, more so than the tidy prescriptions for doing business God’s way so commonly encountered in Christian circles.

Working Under the Sun (Eccl 1:1-11)

Work is the core activity explored in Ecclesiastes. It is generally called “toil,” (Heb. *amal*) which indicates the hardship of work. The topic is introduced at the beginning of the book in verse Eccl. 1:3: “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” The Teacher’s assessment of toil is that it is “vanity” (Eccl. 2:1). This word, *hebel* in Hebrew, dominates Ecclesiastes. The word *hebel* actually means “breath,” but from that it comes to refer to something that is insubstantial, fleeting and of no permanent value. It is superbly suited to be the keyword for this book because a breath is by nature brief and of little discernible substance, and it quickly dissipates. Yet our survival hangs upon these brief intakes and exhalations of puffs of air. Soon, however, breathing will cease and life will end. The word *hebel*, similarly, describes something of fleeting value that will ultimately come to an end. In one sense, “vanity” is a misleading translation, since it appears to assert that everything is utterly worthless. But the real point of *hebel* is that something has only a fleeting, ephemeral value. A single breath may not have permanent value, but in its one moment, it keeps us alive. In the same way, what we are and do in this transitory life has real, though temporary, significance.

Consider the work of building a ship. By God’s good creation, the earth holds the raw materials we need to build ships. Human ingenuity and hard work — also created by God — can create safe, capable, even beautiful, ships. They join the fleet and transport food, resources, manufactured goods, and people to where they are needed. When a ship is launched and the bottle of champagne broken across its bow, everyone involved can celebrate their accomplishment. Yet once it leaves the yard, the builders have no control over it. It may be captained by a fool who smashes it against the shoals. It may be chartered to smuggle drugs, weapons or even slaves. Its crew may be treated harshly. It may serve nobly for many years, yet even so it will wear out and become obsolete. Its eventual fate is nearly certain to be a ship breaking yard, probably located in a country where worker safety and environmental pollution are treated lightly. It passes, like the puffs of wind that once powered ships, first into rusty bones, then into a mix of recycled metal and discarded waste, and finally out of human knowledge. Ships are good. They do not last forever. As long as we live, we must work in this tension.

This brings us to the image of the sun racing around the earth, which we discussed in the introduction (Eccl. 1:5). The ceaseless activity by this great object in the sky brings the light and warmth we depend on every day, yet changes nothing as the ages go by. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). This is an unsentimental observation, though not an eternal condemnation, about our work.

Work is a Chasing After Wind (Eccl 1:12-6:9)

Having declared his theme that toil is vanity in Eccl. 1:1-11, the Teacher nonetheless proceeds to explore various possibilities for trying to live life well. He considers, in order, achievement, pleasure,

wisdom, wealth, timing, friendship and finding joy in God's gifts. In some of these he does find a certain value, less in the earlier explorations and more in the latter. Yet nothing seems permanent, and the characteristic conclusion in each section is that work comes to "a chasing after wind."

Achievement (Eccl 1:12-18)

First the Teacher explores achievement. He was both a king and a sage — an overachiever to use today's terms — "surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me" (Eccl. 1:16). And what did all his achievement mean to him? Not much. "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccl. 1:13-14). No lasting achievement even seems possible. "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (Eccl. 1:15). Achieving his goals did not give him happiness, for it only made him realize how hollow and limited anything he could accomplish must be. In sum, he says again, "I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind" (Eccl. 1:17-18).

Pleasure (Eccl 2:1-11)

Next he says to himself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself" (Eccl. 2:1). He acquires wealth, houses, gardens, alcohol, servants (slaves), jewelry, entertainment and ready access to sexual pleasure. "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure" (Eccl. 2:10a).

Unlike with achievement, he finds some value in seeking pleasure. "My heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil" (Eccl. 2:10). His supposed achievements had turned out to be nothing new, but his pleasures at least were pleasurable. It seems that work undertaken as a means to an end — in this case, pleasure — is more satisfying than work undertaken as an obsession. Without necessarily taking "many concubines" (Eccl. 2:8), today's workers might do well to take time to smell the roses, as the saying goes. If we have ceased to work towards a goal beyond work, if we can no longer enjoy the fruits of our labor, we have become slaves of work, rather than its masters.

Nonetheless, toiling merely in order to gain pleasure is ultimately unsatisfying. This section ends with the assessment that "again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccl. 2:11).

Wisdom (Eccl 2:12-17)

Perhaps it is good to seek an object outside of work itself, but a higher objective is needed than

pleasure. So the teacher reports, “I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly” (Eccl. 2:12). In other words, he becomes something akin to today’s professor or researcher. Unlike achievement for achievement’s sake, wisdom can at least be attained to some degree. “I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (Eccl. 2:13). But other than filling the head with exalted thoughts, it makes no real difference in life, for “the wise die just like fools” (Eccl. 1:16). Pursuing wisdom led the Teacher to the brink of despair (Eccl. 1:17), a result that remains all too common in academic pursuits today. The teacher concludes, “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 2:17).

Wealth (Eccl 2:18-26)

Then the Teacher turns to wealth, which may be gained as a result of toil. What about the accumulation of wealth as the higher purpose behind work? This turns out to be worse than spending wealth to gain pleasure. Wealth brings the problem of inheritance. When you die, the wealth you accumulated will pass to someone else who may be completely undeserving. “Sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil” (Eccl. 2:21). This is so galling that the Teacher says, “I turned and gave my heart up to despair” (Eccl. 2:20).

At this point, we get our first glimpse of the character of God. God is a giver. “To the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy” (Eccl. 2:26). This aspect of God’s character is repeated several times in Ecclesiastes, and his gifts include food, drink and joy (Eccl. 5:18, 8:15), wealth and possessions (Eccl. 5:19, 6:20), honor (Eccl. 6:2), integrity (Eccl. 7:29), the world we inhabit (Eccl. 11:5) and life itself (Eccl. 12:7).

Like the Teacher, many people today who accumulate great wealth find it extremely unsatisfying. While we are making our fortunes, no matter how much we have, it doesn’t seem to be enough. When our fortunes are made and we begin to appreciate our mortality, giving away our wealth wisely seems to become a nearly intolerable burden. Andrew Carnegie noted the weight of this burden when he said, “I resolved to stop accumulating and begin the infinitely more serious and difficult task of wise distribution.”^[5] Yet, if God is a giver, it is no surprise that the distribution of wealth, rather than its accumulation, might be more satisfying.

But the Teacher does not find satisfaction in giving wealth any more than in gaining it (Eccl. 2:18-21). The satisfaction God in heaven finds in giving somehow escapes the Teacher under the sun. He does not seem to consider the possibility of investing wealth or giving it away for a higher purpose. Unless there is indeed a higher purpose beyond anything the Teacher discovers, the accumulation and distribution of wealth “also is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 2:26).

Timing (Eccl 3:1-4:6)

If work has no single, unchanging purpose, perhaps it has a myriad of purposes, each meaningful in its own time. The Teacher explores this in the famous chapter beginning, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (Eccl. 3:1). The key is that every activity is governed by time.

[Timing Matters \(Click to watch\)](#)

Greg Forgatch and Neil Clark Warren, co-founders of eHarmony, say that their company came to the market with the right offer at the right time. What Dr. Warren was doing for people one-on-one became available to millions as technology advanced.

Work that is completely wrong at one time may be right and necessary at another. At one moment it is right to mourn and wrong to dance, and at another moment the opposite is true.

None of these activities or conditions is permanent. We are not angels in timeless bliss. We are creatures of this world going through the changes and seasons of time. This is another hard lesson. We deceive ourselves about the fundamental nature of life if we think our labors can bring about permanent peace, prosperity or happiness. Someday, everything we have built will rightly be torn down (Eccl. 3:3). If our work has any eternal value, the Teacher sees no sign of it “under the sun” (Eccl. 4:1). Our condition is doubly difficult in that we are creatures of the moment, but, unlike the animals, we have “a sense of past and future” in our minds (Eccl. 3:11). Thus, the Teacher longs for that which has permanent value, even though he cannot find it.

Moreover, even the timely good that people try to do may be thwarted by oppression. “On the side of their oppressors there was power — with no one to comfort them” (Eccl. 4:1). Worst of all is oppression by the government. “I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there” (Eccl. 3:16). Yet the powerless are not necessarily any better. A common response to feeling powerless is envy. We envy those who have the power, wealth, status, relationships, possessions or other things we lack. The Teacher recognizes that envy is as bad as oppression. “I saw that all toil and skill in work come from one person’s envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 4:4). The drive to gain achievement, pleasure, wisdom or wealth either by oppression or by envy is an utter waste of time. Yet who has never fallen into both of these follies?

But the Teacher does not despair, for time is a gift from God himself. “God has made everything suitable for its time” (Eccl. 3:11a). It is right to cry at the funeral of a loved one, and it is good to rejoice at the birth of a child. And we should not refuse the legitimate pleasures our work may bring. “There is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” (Eccl. 3:12-13).

These life lessons apply in particular to work. “So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot” (Eccl. 3:22a). Work is *under* the curse, but work is not in itself a curse. Even the limited vision we have into the future is a kind of blessing, for it relieves us of the burden of trying to foresee all ends. “Who can bring people to see what will be after them?” (Eccl. 3:22b). If our work serves the times that we *can* foresee, then it is a gift from God.

At this point, we get two glimpses of God’s character. First, God is awesome, eternal, omniscient, “so that all should stand in awe before him” (Eccl. 3:14). Although we are limited by the conditions of life under the sun, God is not. There is more to God than meets the eye. The transcendence of God — to give it a theological name — appears again in Eccl. 7:13-14 and 8:12-13.

The second glimpse shows us that God is a God of justice. “God seeks out what has gone by” (Eccl. 3:15) and “God will judge the righteous and the wicked” (Eccl. 3:17). This idea is repeated later in Eccl. 8:13, 11:9 and 12:14. We may not see God’s justice in the apparent unfairness of life, but the Teacher assures us it will come to pass.

As we have noted, Ecclesiastes is a realistic exploration of life in the fallen world. Work is toilsome. Yet even amid the toil, our lot is to take pleasure in our toil and enjoy our work. This is not an answer to the conundrums of life, but a sign that God is in the world, even if we do not see clearly what exactly that means for us. Despite this somewhat hopeful note, the exploration of timing ends with a double repetition of “a chasing after wind,” once in Eccl. 4:4 (as discussed above) and again in Eccl. 4:6.

Friendship (Eccl 4:7-4:16)

Perhaps relationships offer real meaning in work. The Teacher extols the value of friendships at work. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their *toil*” (Eccl. 4:9, emphasis added).

[Two are Better Than One \(Click to watch\)](#)

David Bowden and Miles Corbett launched their business knowing they needed each other. They own Transition Associates based in the United Kingdom which delivers e-learning programs for some of the world’s leading corporations.

How many people find their closest friendships in the workplace? Even if we didn’t need the pay, even if the work didn’t interest us, we might find deep meaning in our work relationships. That’s one reason that many people find retirement disappointing. We miss our workplace friends after we leave, and we find it difficult to form deep, new friendships without the common goals that brought us together with colleagues at work.

Building good relationships at work requires openness and a desire to learn from others. “Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice” (Eccl. 4:13). Arrogance and power are often barriers to developing the relationships on which effective work depends (Eccl. 4:14-16), a truth explored in the Harvard Business School article, “How Strength Becomes a Weakness.” [6] We become friends at work partly because it takes teamwork to do the work well. This is one reason many people are better at forming friendships at work than in social settings in which there is no shared goal.

The Teacher’s exploration of friendship is more upbeat than his earlier explorations. Yet even so, work friendships are necessarily temporary. Job assignments change, teams are formed and dissolve, colleagues quit, retire and get fired, and new workers join whom we may not like. The teacher likens it to a new, young king whose subjects receive him gladly at first, but whose popularity drops as a new generation of youth comes to regard him as just another old king. In the end, neither career advancement nor fame offers satisfaction. “Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 4:16).

Joy (Eccl 5:1-6:9)

The Teacher’s search for meaning in work ends with many short lessons that have direct application to work. *First*, listening is wiser than speaking, “therefore let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:1). *Second*, keep your promises, above all to God (Eccl. 5:4). *Third*, expect the government to be corrupt. This is not good, but it is universal, and it is better than anarchy (Eccl. 5:8-9). *Fourth*, obsession for wealth is an addiction, and like any other addiction, it consumes those it afflicts (Eccl. 5:10-12), yet it does not satisfy (Eccl. 6:7-8). *Fifth*, wealth is fleeting. It may disappear in this life, and it is sure to disappear at death. Don’t build your life on it (Eccl. 5:13-17).

[Find Joy in Every Task \(Click to watch\)](#)

Joe T. Garcia’s is a busy restaurant and considered an icon in Fort Worth, Texas. Lanny Lancarte and his wife Jodi are part of the third generation that runs this family-owned operation. They say they work hard at having fun while they deliver delicious food and extraordinary service.

In the midst of this section, the Teacher explores again the gift of God in allowing us to enjoy our work and the wealth, possessions, and honor it may bring for a time. “It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us” (Eccl. 5:18). Although the enjoyment is fleeting, it is real. “For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts” (Eccl. 5:20). This joy comes not

from striving more successfully than others, but from receiving life and work as a gift from God. If joy in our work does not come as a gift from God, it does not come at all (Eccl. 6:1-6).

[Make Your Work Your Play \(Click to watch\)](#)

Scott Mooney is the founder of Country Supply based in Ottumwa, Iowa. He built his horse supply business into a catalog company with 450,000 customers generating \$17 million in annual sales.

As in the section on friendship, the Teacher's tone is relatively positive in this section. Yet the final result is still frustration. For we see plainly that all lives end in the grave, when the life lived wisely comes to nothing greater than the life lived foolishly. It is better to see this plainly than to try to live in a fairy-tale illusion. "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire" (Eccl. 6:8a). But the end result of our lives remains "vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccl. 6:9).

There is No Way to Find Out What is Good to Do (Eccl 6:10-8:17)

A life of toil amounts to a chasing after wind, for the results of work are not permanent in the world as the Teacher knows it. So he begins a search to find out what is best to do with the time he has. As seen earlier in the book, this block of material is divided into sections demarked by a phrase repeated at the end of each exploration. In frustration of the Teacher's hope, that phrase is "not find out," or its equivalent rhetorical question, "who can find out?"

The Ultimate Results Of Our Actions (Eccl. 7:1-14)

Our toil ends with our death. Ecclesiastes therefore recommends that we spend some serious time in the cemetery (Eccl. 7:1-6). Can we see any real advantage that one tomb has over another? Some people whistle past the graveyard, refusing to consider its lessons. Their laughter is like the crackling of burning thorns, as it is consumed in the flames (Eccl. 7:6).

Because our time is short, we cannot find out what impact we may have on the world. We cannot even find out why today is different from yesterday (Eccl. 7:10), let alone what tomorrow may bring. It makes sense to enjoy whatever good comes of our toil while we live, but we have no promise that the final end is good, for "God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may *not find out* anything that will come after them" (Eccl. 7:14).

One application we can draw from our ignorance of our legacy, is that good ends are no justification for evil means. For we cannot see the ends of all the actions we take, and the power to mitigate the

consequences of our means could come at any time. Politicians who appease public opinion now at the cost of public harm later, financial officers who hide losses this quarter in the hope of making it up next quarter, graduates who lie on a job application with the hope of succeeding in jobs they are not qualified for — all of them are counting on futures they do not have the power to bring about. Meanwhile, they are doing harm now that can never truly be erased even if their hopes do come true.

Good And Evil (Eccl. 7:15-28)

So we must try to act *now* according to the good. Yet we cannot really know whether any action we take is wholly good or wholly evil. When we imagine we are acting righteously, wickedness may creep in, and vice versa (Eccl. 7:16-18). For “surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning” (Eccl. 7:20). The truth of good and evil “is far off, and deep, very deep; *who can find it out?*” (Eccl. 7:24, emphasis added). As if to emphasize this difficulty, the characteristic phrase “*not found*” is repeated again twice in Eccl. 7:28.

The best we can do is to fear God (Eccl. 7:18); that is to say, to avoid arrogance and self-righteousness. A good self-diagnostic is to examine whether we have to resort to twisted logic and complicated schemes to justify our actions. “God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29). Work has many complexities, many factors that have to be taken into account, and moral certainty is usually impossible. But ethical pretzel logic is almost always a bad sign.

Power And Justice (Eccl. 8:1-17)

The exercise of power is a fact of life, and we have a duty to obey those in authority over us (Eccl. 8:2-5). Yet we do not know whether they will use their authority justly. Quite possibly, they will use their power to harm others (Eccl. 8:9). Justice is perverted. The righteous are punished, and the wicked are rewarded (Eccl. 8:10-14).

In the midst of this uncertainty, the best we can do is to fear God (Eccl. 8:13) and enjoy the opportunities for happiness that he gives us. “I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun” (Eccl. 8:15).

As in the previous section, the marker phrase “*not find out*” is repeated three times at the end of this topic. “*No one can find out* what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they *cannot find it out*” (Eccl. 8:17). This brings to an end the Teacher’s search to find out what is good to do with the limited time we have. Although he has discovered some good practices, the overall result is that he could not find out what is truly meaningful.

There is No Way to Know What Comes Afterwards (Eccl 9:1-11:6)

Perhaps it would be possible to work out what is best to do in life if it were possible to know what comes afterwards. So the Teacher searches for knowledge about death (Eccl. 9:1-6), Sheol (Eccl. 9:7-10), the time of death (Eccl. 9:11-12), what comes after death (Eccl. 13:10-15), the evil that might come after death (Eccl. 10:16-11:2), and the good that might come (Eccl. 11:3-6). Again, a repeated marker phrase — in this case “do not know” and its equivalent “no knowledge” — divides the material into sections.

The Teacher finds that it is simply not possible to know what lies ahead. “The dead **know nothing**” (Eccl. 9:5). “There is **no** work or thought or **knowledge** or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (Eccl. 9:10). “Man **does not know** his time... the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them” (Eccl. 9:12, NASB. The NRSV gives an idiosyncratic translation that obscures the characteristic phrase.). “**No one knows** what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?” (Eccl. 10:14). “You do **not know** what disaster may happen on earth” (Eccl. 11:2). “You do **not know** which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good” (Eccl. 11:5-6).

Despite our colossal ignorance about the future, the Teacher finds some things that are good to do while we have the chance. We will explore only those passages that are particularly relevant to work.

Throw Yourself Into Your Work Wholeheartedly (Eccl. 9:10)

[Live, Breathe, Eat, Sleep Your Work \(Click to watch\)](#)

Ken Done wakes up in the night with ideas he can't wait to try. He even paints on his dining room table. While they are both past what some call “retirement age,” Mr. Done and his wife, Judy, have over 100 employees working for The Ken Done Group of Companies based in Sydney, Australia.

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (Eccl. 9:10). Although we cannot know the final result of our work, there is no point letting this paralyze us. Humans are created to work (Genesis 2:15), we need to work to survive, and so we might as well work with gusto. The same goes for enjoying the fruits of our work, whatever they may be. “Eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do” (Eccl. 9:7).

Accept Success and Failure as a Part of Life (Eccl. 9:11-12)

[It's Tough to Go Up Against the Establishment \(Click to watch\)](#)

John Solheim, CEO of Phoenix-based Ping Golf, recalls when the United States Golf Association outlawed products he and his father had worked over a decade to develop. These renegades persevered and today they are leaders within their industry.

First, we should not fool ourselves into thinking either that our success is due to our own merits or that our failure is due to our own shortcomings. “I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccl. 9:11). Success or failure may be due to dumb luck. This is not to say that hard work and ingenuity aren’t important. They prepare us to make the most of the chances of life, and they may create opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t exist. Yet one who succeeds at work may be no more deserving than another who fails. For example, Microsoft had a crack at success largely because of IBM’s offhand decision to use the MS-DOS operating system for a backwater project called the personal computer. Bill Gates later reflected, “Our timing in setting up the first software company aimed at personal computers was essential to our success. The timing wasn't entirely luck, but without great luck it couldn't have happened.” Asked why he had started a software company just at the time IBM was trying its luck with a personal computer, he replied, “I was born at the right place and time.”^[7]

Work Diligently and Invest Wisely (Eccl. 10:18-11:6)

[Persistence Pays \(Click to watch\)](#)

Diligence, persistence and growth through retained earnings moved Ping Golf from the Solheim garage to its 35-acre campus in Phoenix. From the father-son team, the company has grown to over 900 employees who work each day making some of the world’s most popular golf clubs.

This passage contains the most direct financial advice to be found anywhere in the Bible. *First*, be diligent, otherwise your household economy will collapse like a leaky, rotten roof (Eccl. 10:18). *Second*, understand that in this life financial well-being does matter. “Money meets every need” (Eccl. 10:19) can be read in a cynical manner, but the text does not say that money is the only thing that matters. The point is simply that money is necessary for dealing with all kinds of issues. To put it in modern terms, if my car needs a new transmission, or my daughter needs college tuition, or I want to take my family on a vacation, it is going to take money. This is not greed or materialism; it is common sense. *Third*, be careful about people in authority (Eccl. 10:20). If you belittle your boss or even a customer, you may live to regret it. *Fourth*, diversify your investments (Eccl. 11:1-2). “Send out your bread upon

the waters” does not refer to charitable giving, but to investments; in this case, the “waters” represent a venture in overseas trading. Thus, giving portions to “seven” or “eight” refers to diverse investments, “for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth” (Eccl. 11:2). *Fifth*, don’t be overly timid about investing (Eccl. 11:3-5). What will happen, will happen, and you cannot control that (Eccl. 11:3). But this should not frighten us into putting money under a mattress where it yields nothing. Instead, we should find the courage to take reasonable risks. “Whoever observes the wind will not plant; whoever regards the clouds will not reap” (Eccl. 11:4). *Sixth*, understand that success is in God’s hands. But you don’t know what plans or purposes he has, so don’t try to second-guess him (Eccl. 11:5). *Seventh*, be persistent (Eccl. 11:6). Don’t work hard for a little while and then say, “I tried that, and it didn’t work.”

The Teacher’s search for knowledge about the future ends at Eccl. 11:5-6 with a triple repetition of the marker phrase “not know.” This reminds us that although working wholeheartedly, accepting success and failure as part of life, and working diligently and investing wisely are good practices, they are merely adaptations to deal with our ignorance of the future. If we truly knew how our actions would play out, we could plan confidently for success. If we knew which investments would turn out well, we would not need to diversify as a hedge against systemic losses. It is hard to know whether to hang our heads in sorrow for the disasters that may befall us in this fallen world, or to praise God that it is still possible to muddle through, and maybe even to do well, in such a world. Or is the truth a bit of both?

A Poem on Youth and Old Age (Eccl 11:7-12:8)

The Teacher concludes with a poem exhorting the young to good cheer (Eccl. 11:7-12:1) and recounting the troubles of old age (Eccl. 12:2-8). It recapitulates the pattern found in the earlier sections of the book. There is much good to be found in our life and work, but ultimately it is all fleeting. The Teacher closes as he began, “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity” (Eccl. 12:8).

Epilogue of Praise for the Teacher (Eccl 12:9-14)

There follows an epilogue about, rather than by, the Teacher. It praises his wisdom and repeats his admonition to fear God. It adds new elements not found earlier in the book, namely the wisdom of following God’s commandments in light of God’s future judgment.

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13-14)

God’s future judgment is seen as the key to sorting out the mix of good and evil that pervades work in

the fallen world. The glimpses of God's character that we have seen in the book — God's generosity, justice, and transcendence beyond the confines of the world — depict an underlying goodness in the foundations of the world, if we could only live accordingly. This begins to hint that in God's time the tensions so vividly described by the Teacher will be brought into a harmony not visible in the Teacher's day under the sun. Is it possible that the Epilogue envisions a day when the conditions of the Fall do not hold sway over our life and work?

Conclusions to Ecclesiastes

What are we to make of this mix of good and ill, meaning and vanity, action and ignorance, which the Teacher finds in life and work? Work is a "chasing after wind," as the Teacher continually reminds us. Like the wind, work is real and it has an impact while it lasts. It keeps us alive, and it offers opportunities for joy. Yet it is difficult to assess the full effect of our work, to foresee the unintended consequences for good and ill. And it is impossible to know what our work may lead to beyond the present moment. Does work amount to anything lasting, anything eternal, anything ultimately good? The Teacher says it is really not possible to know anything for certain under the sun.

But we may have a different perspective. Unlike the Teacher, followers of Christ today see a concrete hope beyond the fallen world. For we are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of a new Teacher, Jesus, whose power did not die with the end of his days under the sun (Luke 23:44). He announces that "the kingdom of God has come to you" (Matthew 12:28). The world we live in now is in the process of being brought under Christ's rule and redeemed by God. What the writer of Ecclesiastes did not know — could not know, as he was so keenly aware — is that God would send his Son not to condemn the world, but to restore the world to the way God intended it to be (John 3:17). The days of the fallen world under the sun are passing in favor of the kingdom of God on earth, where God's people "need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light" (Revelation 22:5). Because of this, the world in which we live is not only the remnant of the fallen world, but also the vanguard of the kingdom of Christ, "coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2).

The work we do as followers of Christ therefore does — or at least could — have eternal value that could not have been visible to the Teacher. We work not only in the world under the sun, but also in the kingdom of God. This is not to engage in a misguided attempt to correct Ecclesiastes with a dose of the New Testament. Rather, it is to appreciate Ecclesiastes as God's gift to us as it stands. For we, too, live daily life under much the same conditions the Teacher did. As Paul reminds us, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23). We groan under the same weight the Teacher did because we are still waiting for the fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth.

Ecclesiastes, then, offers two insights unmatched elsewhere in scripture: 1) an unvarnished account of work under the conditions of the Fall; and 2) a witness of hope in the darkest circumstances of work.

An Unvarnished Account of Work Under the Fall (Ecclesiastes)

If we know that work in Christ has a lasting value not visible to the Teacher, how can his words still be helpful to us? To begin with, they affirm that the toil, oppression, failure, meaninglessness, sorrow and pain we experience in work are real. Christ has come, but life for his followers has not yet become a walk in the garden. If your experience of work is hard and painful — despite God's promises of good — you are not crazy after all. God's promises are true, but they are not all fulfilled in the present moment. We are caught in the reality that God's kingdom has come to earth now (Matthew 12:28), but it is not yet brought to completion (Revelation 21:2). At the very least, it may be a comfort that scripture dares to depict the harsh realities of life and work, while yet proclaiming that God is Lord.

If Ecclesiastes serves as a comfort to those working in harsh conditions, it may also serve as a challenge to those blessed with good working conditions. Do not become complacent! Until work becomes a blessing to everyone, God's people are called to struggle for the benefit of all workers. We are indeed meant to eat, drink and find enjoyment in all the toil we are blessed with. But we do this while striving — as also we pray — that God's kingdom come.

A Witness of Hope in the Darkest Circumstances of Work (Ecclesiastes)

Ecclesiastes also gives an example of how to maintain hope in the midst of the harsh realities of work in the fallen world. Despite the worst that he sees and experiences, the Teacher does not abandon hope in God's world. He finds the moments of joy, the sparks of wisdom, and the ways to cope with a world that is ephemeral, but not absurd. If God had abandoned humanity to the consequences of the Fall, there would be no meaning, no good in work at all. Instead, the Teacher finds that there is meaning, and goodness in work. His complaint is that they are always transitory, incomplete, uncertain, limited. Given the alternative — a world completely without God — these are actually signs of hope.

[Commit to Improve Your Industry \(Click to watch\)](#)

Hope comes from believing that you can be part of making something better and that is probably why Ebby Halliday is energetic and beautiful even in her 90s! She never gives up hope and after decades of growing a business, she gave it to her employees and put a succession plan in place. Her Dallas-based creation, Ebby Halliday REALTORS is one of the largest privately owned residential real estate firms in the US.

These signs of hope may be a comfort to us in our darkest experiences of life and work. Moreover, they give us an understanding of our co-workers who have not received the good news of Christ's kingdom.

Their experience of work may be very similar to the Teacher's. If we can imagine enduring the difficulties we experience, but without the promise of Christ's redemption, then we can gain a glimpse of the burden life and work may be to our co-workers. Pray to God this will at least give us more compassion. Perhaps it will also give us a more effective witness. For if we are to bear witness to Christ's good news, we must start by entering the reality of those to whom we bear witness. Otherwise, our witness is meaningless, glib, self-serving and vain.

[Create Opportunity for Others \(Click to watch\)](#)

The brilliance of Ecclesiastes may be precisely that it *is* so upsetting. Life is upsetting, and Ecclesiastes faces life honestly. We need to be upset when we become too accommodated to life "under the sun," too dependent on the comforts we may find in situations of prosperity and ease. We need to be upset in the opposite direction when we fall into cynicism and despair because of the hardships we face. Whenever we make an idol of the transitory achievements of our work and the arrogance it produces in us — and conversely whenever we fail to recognize the transcendent meaning of our work and the value of the people we work among — we need to be upset. Ecclesiastes may be uniquely capable of upsetting us to the glory of God.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Roland Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, Vol. 23A (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002), xxxv.
- [2] Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), 313-334.
- [3] Including J.S.M. Mulder, R. Rendtorff (partially), A. Schoors (partially) and R. Murphy. See Roland Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, Vol. 23A (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002), xxxvi- xxxviii.
- [4] Roland Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, Vol. 23A (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002), 7.
- [5] Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 255.
- [6] Monci J. Williams, "How Strength Becomes a Weakness," *Harvard Management Update*, December 1996, available as article reprint no. U9612D.
- [7] "Bill Gates Answers Most Frequently Asked Questions" [document on-line]; available from

http://download.microsoft.com/download/0/c/0/c020894-1f95-408c-a571-1b5033c75bbc/billg_fa.doc; (12 February 2010).