

A Table in the Mist
Meditations on Ecclesiastes



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A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes
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TO JEFFREY

*May God keep you occupied
with the joy of your heart!*

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PREFACE

As I sit in my quiet basement study writing this preface, the world outside is buzzing with commotion. It is Christmas time. With less than a week of shopping left before the big day, there is a great whirl of activity everywhere. Everyone is frantically making preparations. Businesses are throwing parties. Families are gathering for annual feasts. Dazzling decorations have been strewn over buildings, homes, and even doghouses. Bright lights, evergreen boughs, multi-colored bulbous ornaments, and glittering silver strands of garland garnish windows and doorways all up and down the street. It would seem, from all outward appearances, that everything is right in the world, that peace and joy reign supreme.

But, as everyone knows, colorful Christmas decorations often mask dark depression for many people. Even though the feast of Christmas ought to be a time when even those who have much to be troubled about experience a ray of divine joy and happiness around the table with relatives and friends, oftentimes the season itself exacerbates people's problems. How can this be?

The Christmas holiday season has been increasingly cut loose from its foundation in the Bible and Christian tradition. Modern Christmas seasons provide us with little more than sentimental, syrupy niceness and nice thoughts about a mistily-glowing baby Jesus. All we are left with is the commoditization of vague religious sentimentalism. There is no spiritual power in this. What's worse, because of this the Christian faith seems, to many in our culture, little more than an attempt to stir up comforting religious feelings to mask one's real troubles in the world. But this is so far removed from the Bible and genuine Christian tradition that it has to be considered another religion, one that plays make-believe with the dirty realities of this life.

What does all this have to do with Ecclesiastes? Simply this: when the true faith is robustly biblical, it will also honestly narrate and confront the intractable evil and misery of this life. Solomon records his observations with shocking candor: "Everything is vapor."

Trying to control your life is like “shepherding the wind.” “What is twisted cannot be made straight.” “No man has power over the day of death.” Solomon’s frank meditations are not at odds with the gospel story. The biblical Christmas story has the eternal Son of God take on our dilapidated flesh and enter our fallen world as Savior. There is no sugarcoating the bitter social, political, and economic troubles of the world that Jesus enters. Just read the birth narratives in the gospels. Matthew and Luke were wise like Solomon, which means they were honest about the world. Indeed, the coming of Jesus teased out the worst in humanity. After all, in the end the world conspires to murder the innocent Son of God.

What may be surprising to some who are not familiar with the story of the Bible as a whole is that Solomon’s lively faith *also* commends dancing and feasting with exuberance, rejoicing in the good gifts that God has provided for his people. “Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vaporous life.” For Solomon, one can do nothing better than drink wine, enjoy the woman God has given him, and sing and dance with the revelers at the feasts of Yahweh.

Back to Christmas. The problem, then, of course, is not with Christmas, not even with Christmas decorations. It’s not that people are too happy or feast with abandon. We should celebrate Christmas with wild, joyous abandon, as Solomon himself would surely endorse. But we must be careful not to allow our feasting to blind us to the reality of the curse. We sing “Joy to the world” because we believe that Jesus has come “to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.”

The Christmas season is wonderful, pure joy. I even love what some derisively lament as “the commercialization” of Christmas. I say, let the brilliant lights multiply and beautify every home on the block. None of this is meant to deny that the world is dark and cold. Christians must be realists about the world and life; the Bible is. The church celebrates Christmas season in the dead of winter for good reasons. Faith does not mean ignoring the “living death,” as Augustine put it, of our cursed world; rather, it means trusting

God while confessing our own bafflement and impotence to change our death-stamped existence in this world. This is where Solomon's Ecclesiastes can help us modern Christians. As we shall see, biblical wisdom does not give us the power to leverage the world to insure our own health or success. Death in its various forms is everyone's future. Nevertheless, we can genuinely enjoy life. Joy *and* curse, not one or the other. According to Solomon, the wise man will affirm them both.

And what better way for a Christian to rediscover the spiritual power in honest evaluations of our twisted world and life than to read and mediate on Solomon's Ecclesiastes? In Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451*, the reclusive Professor Faber explains to the curious Guy Montag the "magic" of books. He is holding a very rare copy of the Bible brought to him by Montag.

Do you know why books such as this are important? Because they have quality. And what does the word quality mean? To me it means texture. This book has *pores*. It has features. This book can go under the microscope. You'd find life under the glass, streaming past in infinite profusion. The more pores, the more truthfully recorded details of life per square inch you can get on a sheet of paper, the more "literary" you are. That's *my* definition, anyway. *Telling detail. Fresh detail.* The good writers touch life often. The mediocre ones run a quick hand over her. The bad ones rape her and leave her for the flies. So now do you see why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless. We are living in a time when flowers are trying to live on flowers, instead of growing on good rain and black loam. (Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* [New York: Ballantine, 1953], 83)

I can't help but think of the book of Ecclesiastes when I read Faber's description of a good book. Of course, he is holding the Bible as he makes this little speech, and Ecclesiastes is quoted in the story more than once. Solomon's book is the perfect example of literature that shows the "pores in the face of life." The son of David is so honest about the difficulties in life that it scares many Christians, and he trusts God so much he has a bit too much fun—

he drinks wine and actually enjoys sex with his wife! This is way too much “fresh detail” for some Christians.

I am convinced that this is one of the reasons why so many commentaries and sermon series are, in effect, massive efforts to domesticate Solomon’s wisdom. His observations, maxims, and advice, we are sometimes told by pious commentators, are the desperate ramblings of a hopeless pagan soul, not the wisdom of a faithful believer. How could a believer be so pessimistic? How could a believer condone such pleasure? So the mantle of a pagan sage is forced on Solomon and the book then becomes simply an apologetic tool to show us that life apart from God is meaningless. But this is a lot like modern escapist Christmas celebrations. It ignores reality. It is a childish and immature way of handling the harsh realities of life, but I’m getting ahead of myself. I invite you to join me in hearing Solomon as he fulfills his vocation as shepherd king of Israel by faithfully communicating the wisdom of the divine Shepherd through delightful words of truth (Eccl. 11:9–14). The mature king invites us to a feast at a table in the mist. At that table we are called to enjoy wine, woman, and song—all gracious gifts of God to be enjoyed by faith.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In order to keep the book free of the marks of academia, I have not referenced every source I consulted. I have benefited from many different commentators, only a few of which are mentioned in the text. My hope is that the book will be easily accessible to most Christians, not just academically sophisticated readers.

A heart-felt thank you to all who have helped me write this book. Mark Horne transcribed my sermons and added his own sound advice and comments at many points in the course of his work. Mark’s intellectual gifts and exegetical discernment have yet to be “discovered,” but for me he has been a trusted confidant and discerning assistant for many years. I appreciate the care he took in helping me with this commentary.

Special thanks are reserved for James B. Jordan. Having now spent many years in theological education, both at Covenant Theological Seminary (MDiv) and Concordia Theological Seminary (STM and PhD studies), I can honestly say that I have never known another teacher who knows the Bible so thoroughly as Jim Jordan. He's been my teacher and a good friend for many years. I only hope this popular commentary lives up to his high standards.

I must also thank the elders of Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church. They have been very generous, gracious, and accommodating to me as I worked on this book. Indeed, this is their standard mode of operation! And without the encouragement of the members of Providence I don't know that it would have ever occurred to me to make the effort necessary to get these comments on Ecclesiastes published. The Lord has been uncommonly merciful to me in giving me such a responsive congregation. Sharing a common Table with such a company of saints has indeed been the best antidote to the misty, uncontrollable existence of life under the sun. I pray that this book will bear similar fruit as more and more Christians embrace the astonishing wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

And finally, I must thank my own wife with whom I have been gifted by God to enjoy life. For twenty-seven years she has been the stability of our home and the source of constant joy for me in this altogether vaporous life. Heeding Solomon's sage advice, we have had many relaxing evenings together over a bottle of wine. The original working title of this book was *Wine, Woman, and Song*. Well, for me two out of three ain't bad—wine and an amazing woman. Now if I could only dance and sing!

Jeffrey J. Meyers
Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18, 2005

1

THE SHEPHERD KING'S WISDOM

The words of the wise are like goads. —Ecclesiastes 12:11



The wisdom of Ecclesiastes has endlessly fascinated people whether they have understood it or not. While the book's meaning may be mysterious, that mystery has captivated most people who read it, Christian and non-Christian alike. They are enthralled by the book's literary beauty as well as astonished at the elusive nature of its content. Sadly, that fascination has not really helped everyone get a grip on this portion of God's Word.

This victory for Ecclesiastes has actually resulted in a sort of defeat. As has happened all too often with the Bible as a whole, all sorts of clipped quotations from the book have taken on a life of their own to become sayings and stock phrases that one meets in all kinds of contexts that tell you nothing about what the text actually

says. The text's popularity has resulted in its dismemberment. Consider how many of these sayings you have heard outside of reading the Bible.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
There is nothing new under the sun.
For with much wisdom comes much grief, the more knowledge
the more sorrow.
There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under
heaven.
Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them
both.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will
find it again.
Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.
Of the making of many books there is no end, and much study
wearies the body.

It is impossible to be well-acquainted with Western literary culture without having encountered these expressions. Indeed, in some cases they are encountered in popular music from the sixties and in contemporary wedding announcements. In one sense, such quoting is only right and just. The book of Ecclesiastes informs us that the author has sought out, found, and arranged for us "words of delight," and that "uprightly he wrote words of truth" (Eccl. 12:10). He was successful. Yet in spite of our acquaintance with the clever aphorisms of Ecclesiastes, or perhaps even because of it in this popular but scattered form, the book as a whole remains for many an incomprehensible mystery—a huge conundrum smack in the middle of Holy Scripture. What exactly is it that is upright and true about the delightful words of Ecclesiastes?



WHAT IS ECCLESIASTES ABOUT?

Have you ever sat strapped into your seat on a taxiing airplane, wondering how the airport keeps track of all those planes? I have

always been fascinated by the amount of air traffic that airports are able to manage, especially large hubs like O'Hare, Dallas-Fort Worth, or Atlanta. On the ground you can formulate a very sketchy idea of the overall plan, but you cannot see all the planes that are being maneuvered and guided according to some hidden plan. You need to be taken up into the control tower. Many years ago I was in an air traffic control tower in Augusta, Georgia. I was the officer in charge of loading a battalion of army signal equipment into C-130s and C-141s that day, and one of the air force officers took me up.

The equipment was not nearly as sophisticated as it is today, but the air traffic controllers were able to look at the entire situation on their screen and interpret lights, numbers, and codes with such precision that they could control the movement of dozens of aircraft from that control tower. Once you see these screens and learn the codes, the rationality of the plan and the reasons why each plane is precisely where it is become plain.

For many people, both Christians and not, that is what wisdom is supposed to be like. J. I. Packer, however, makes the enormously helpful observation that the mistake often made by Christians is to suppose that a train station signal box is a fitting illustration of how a wise man understands the world. The mistake is to think that

the gift of wisdom consists in a deepened insight into the providential meaning and purpose of events going on around us, an ability to see why God has done what he has done in a particular case, and what he is going to do next. People feel that if they were really walking close to God, so that he could impart wisdom to them freely, then they would, so to speak, find themselves in the signal box; they would discern the real purpose of everything that happened to them, and it would be clear to them how God was making all things work together for good. Such people spend much time poring over the book of providence, wondering why God should have allowed this or that to take place, whether they should take it as a sign to stop one thing and start doing another, or why they should deduce from it. If they end up baffled, they put it down to their own lack of spirituality. (*Knowing God* [repr., 1993, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1973], 92)

The gift of biblical wisdom, in other words, is *not* all about getting a privileged seat in God's traffic control tower of the world. We don't get to understand why things happen the way they do. We are mistaken if we think wisdom gives us that sort of insight.

The other mistake we make about wisdom is to think that godly wisdom gives us leverage such that we can learn to control our lives through the acquisition of biblical knowledge and skill. The idea here is that biblical wisdom is "how-to" wisdom: how to have a successful marriage, how to raise children, how to do business. The outcome can almost be guaranteed if the proper techniques are used. The mistake is to think that biblical wisdom gives one *control*. As Packer writes, "So far from the gift of wisdom consisting in the power to do this, the gift actually presupposes our conscious inability to do it!"

That is the message of Ecclesiastes. What the author intends to teach us is that real biblical wisdom is founded on the honest acknowledgement that this world's course is enigmatic, that most, if not all, of what happens is quite inexplicable, incomprehensible to us, *and* quite out of our control. We cannot leverage the course of the world this way and that to suit our petty purposes. The godly wise man and woman will humbly concede that God has hidden from us almost everything that we should like to know about his providential purposes. Therefore, all of our attempts to influence or comprehend the world and the course of our lives are futile, useless, vain, and empty. Vanity of vanities. The wise man learns to walk by faith and not by sight.

Ecclesiastes is *the* book about faith in the Old Testament. It tells how the man of faith looks at the world. We are told that a wise and faithful person will come to embrace the perspective of Solomon that all of life is "vapor"! The life of faith is not grounded in our ability to discern the meaning of everything in our world. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction concerning things not yet seen (Heb. 11).

Life in itself is unable to supply the key to the questions of identity, meaning, purpose, value, and destiny. Only God holds the key, and he must be trusted with it. He does not make copies of the

key for us to use. You do not get to keep God's key in your back pocket. Sooner or later, if you are a believer, you are going to have to actually trust God to keep the key to life.

To the extent that we have learned true wisdom, our part as Christians is to fear God and keep his commandments, to receive and use the gifts of God with joy and gratitude, that is, to eat, drink, work, love our husbands and wives, rejoicing in all of these things, all the while knowing that we *cannot* understand his ways and *must not* attempt to play god in his world. We must not try to gain leverage to manipulate the world to our petty purposes. That is the wisdom of Solomon.



LISTENING TO THE SHEPHERD KING

A friend of mine once owned a pretty postcard with a sunset pictured on it along with a pious-sounding Bible verse as a caption. The text was from Job 22:21—“Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you.” It sounds like a wonderful promise of God—the sort of verse one might find in those little verse-a-day calendars to help you feel good.

My friend, however, didn't keep the postcard for sentimental value. He kept it because it was hysterically funny. It was a classic example of entirely misreading the Bible and of trading true biblical wisdom for a false but shiny wisdom that we find all too attractive and plausible. Like Ecclesiastes, Job is from the kingly period in Israel's history, when King David composed many psalms and then Solomon used divinely-given wisdom to craft many proverbs. And like all wisdom literature, Job has to be read *carefully*. In the book of Job, God strikes down Job in horrible ways. The book then consists of three “friends” of Job trying to get him to admit that he deserves this calamity because he has done wrong. After all, why else would God make him suffer so dramatically? But the book makes it unambiguously clear that Job is in the right and his accusers are wrong. He has done nothing wrong; God is not punishing him.

The punch line is this: it is neither Job nor God who teaches “agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to

you” (Job 22:21). No, this claim comes from one of Job’s false accusers who is trying to convince Job that he is guilty and is moralistically beating him up in the midst of his tragedy. The makers of the postcard did not bother to track who was speaking within the story of Job or the point of his statement within that story. There are many who would dispute the idea that Ecclesiastes is a book teaching us true Christian wisdom. As in Job, it all depends on who is speaking or what role he may be playing within the book of Ecclesiastes.

The first thing we learn in reading Ecclesiastes is that these words are spoken or written in fulfillment of Solomon’s office as chief shepherd and teacher of the people of God. But this important point is resisted in many circles, both because of and resulting in a fundamental misreading of Ecclesiastes. “ ‘Vanity of vanities.’ What can *this* mean?” readers ask themselves. “In what spirit and for what purpose does Solomon propound this aphorism?” Many wish to grasp at some alternative to the view that Solomon is speaking as a wise man. They don’t want to believe that Solomon is teaching true wisdom within the human limitations that are common to all people, including believers. So they try to come up with other options.

Is the author an embittered cynic? Is this the last gasp of a selfish and callous old man of the world who finds nothing but disillusionment and despair at the end of his life?

Is Solomon speaking as an unbeliever in order to convince pagans of the utter futility of their own worldview? Is this an attempt to convince people that without God, all is empty, vain, useless, and meaningless?

Is this Solomon speaking as the lapsed one? The one who has temporarily abandoned his faith perspective?

These are very popular views. I suspect that too often something like this is our gut-reaction interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Solomon has either fallen off the deep end—or is pretending like he has—in order to warn others about the presence of the pit.

One of these options was certainly my own view at one time. In 1979 I made some marginal comments in a new Bible my fiancée

gave me just a few months before we were married: "This book describes the emptiness and futility of life outside of Christ. For the one who does not know God, everything is vanity." If you don't have faith in God, then life will be meaningless, futile, and vain. I was sure that the author's goal was to show the emptiness of life apart from God. Only with God can we understand the world and life properly. Without the Lord it is all vanity.

I naively thought that when we are reconciled with God by faith we will have no problem understanding the world and life properly. That was what I thought Ecclesiastes was teaching me. This kind of idealistic dream may be the stuff of a 22-year-old Christian's idealistic pseudo-wisdom, but it is most certainly *not* the wisdom of Solomon! His is the wisdom that results from the mature experience of a man of faith. Truth be told, I had not yet read the book very carefully.

While many would deny that Solomon wrote this text as God's chosen king, there is no getting around the clear statement introducing the book of Ecclesiastes: "*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*" That introduction would not be there at the opening of the book if it were unimportant to understanding what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. Introductions serve a purpose. God could have inspired the book to begin with verse two and excluded any reference to a son of David living in God's chosen city, the capital of the people of God, but he chose otherwise. The introduction in verse one clearly tells us that we must hear or read the book of Ecclesiastes as true royal wisdom. It is true, of course, that Solomon lapsed, but there is no way to escape the implication that the book of Ecclesiastes is being *commended* to the reader as the work of God's king.

The author's self-evaluation in 1:16, claiming to have surpassed in wisdom "all who were over Jerusalem before me," is no argument against Solomonic authorship. Some have thought that this statement is too bombastic for Solomon's situation, since he was only the second king to reign in Jerusalem, but this is not accurate. True enough, he was the second *Israelite* king to rule from Jerusalem, but he was one in a long, famous list of kings to rule from Salem. Among

these are Melchizedek, the priest-king who gave Abraham bread and wine (Gen. 14:18), Adonizedek (Josh. 10:1), Araunah (1 Sam. 24:23), and, of course, David. And we are told explicitly in 1 Kings 3:12 that no one after Solomon would be as wise as he.

The words of Ecclesiastes are not the words of a cynic or an epicurean or a humanist or an unbeliever. One can easily infer from the author's status as king in Jerusalem that these are the words of a *pastor*, one appointed by God to shepherd the Lord's flock in wisdom and truth. But there is no need to rely on inference.

In addition to being described as the son of David and the king in Jerusalem, the author of Ecclesiastes is referred to by another title. Sometimes it is translated as "the Preacher," as in the ESV (English Standard Version) of the Bible. In other English translations other words are used such as "teacher." Sometimes people simply transliterate the word as *kohelleth* or *qoheleth*. The Hebrew word is translated by the Greek "ecclesiastes" which means a member of the *ecclesia* or, as we might say, "an ecclesiastic."

The Greek translation is largely on target. *Qoheleth* is from the Hebrew word *qahal*, which means "assembly." The Hebrew word *qoheleth* suggests one who calls together an assembly (*qahal*)—a convener, a gatherer. *Qoheleth* is the one who *convenes* or *assembles* the people together, in this case to teach and instruct in wisdom. Throughout the history of the kings of Israel recorded in Kings and Chronicles we learn that one of the functions of the king was to assemble the people for the annual feasts and for other important national events. When the temple was dedicated at the beginning of Solomon's reign, he gathered (*qahal*) the people for the ceremony (1 Kings 8:1–2, 14, 22, 55, 65). From this information, then, it appears as if the best way to translate *qoheleth* is by a word that denotes the king's office as "gatherer" or "convener." Since this is also what shepherds do with their sheep, it may be best, at times, simply to use the designation "shepherd" to refer to King Solomon's office.

This title again indicates that the author of Ecclesiastes is not some cynic, whether an unbeliever or a backslidden Israelite. This is Solomon speaking in his office as shepherd king of Israel. He is, according to his office as Davidic king, the chief human shepherd

in Israel. He is the anointed ruler of Israel fulfilling his office as shepherd over the Old Testament people of God. Remember, the Lord called to David and his descendants: "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel" (2 Sam. 5:2). And in that capacity Solomon assembled (*qahal*) Israel before the temple (2 Chron. 5:1–3; 6:1).

Consider Ecclesiastes 12:10–11 where the book is nearing its conclusion: "The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd." These are not the words of a cynic, but of a pastor, one representing the divine Shepherd of God's assembly or congregation. This is a book addressed to the people of God. It has a pastoral purpose. It is not addressed to unbelievers as an apologetic for the faith.

What we have here in the book we call Ecclesiastes is the apex of the wisdom of Solomon; not the pseudo-wisdom of a backslidden Solomon. This is the wisdom of Solomon as he occupies the office of shepherd of Israel—as he speaks for the Chief Shepherd.

What does the Pastor, the shepherd king, teach? Not what we might expect a pastor to preach to his congregation. It might be helpful to think about whether or not God's people today are finding real satisfaction in what answers and "wisdom" they expect from our pulpits. As one author and pastor has noted recently:

I drive my car and listen to the Christian radio station; something my wife always tells me I should stop doing ("because it only gets you upset"). There I hear preacher after preacher be so absolutely sure of his bombproof answers and his foolproof *biblical* interpretations (in spite of the fact that Preacher A at 9:30 a.m. usually contradicts Preacher B at 10:00 a.m. and so on throughout the day), his five easy steps (alliterated around the letter *p*) . . . And the more sure he seems, the less I find myself wanting to be a Christian, because on this side of the microphone, antennas, and speakers, life isn't that simple, answers aren't that clear, and nothing is that sure. (Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001], xiii)

Ecclesiastes is written by a different kind of pastor with a different kind of preaching.



THE PLAN OF ECCLESIASTES

Solomon doesn't show all his cards at once. He builds a case, he develops an argument, he progressively spirals in on his major themes. He targets them using "delightful words" which he describes as "well-driven nails" (Eccl. 12:11). The result is that if we follow him carefully, we too will partake of his Spirit-inspired wisdom.

This is why honoring Ecclesiastes with scattered slogans in our culture is not the best way to grasp its wisdom. The book is an argument. It makes up a coherent whole. It is not the compilation of various tidbits of loosely associated aphorisms all stuck together by some later author. Ecclesiastes is not meant to be parceled out into songs and sayings in popular culture. Solomon argues consistently and well for his conclusion: Christians will confess their ignorance and impotence and yet nevertheless receive and rejoice in everything God gives them in life, fearing him and keeping his commands.

The thematic cross-currents and swiftly-moving literary landscape have spoiled academic types of people into thinking that there are between four and nine different authors represented. They point out places within the book that appear to be contradictory, and to them this indicates multiple authors, but that is a superficial way of reading. They misunderstand the way Ecclesiastes works. The Spirit who inspired Ecclesiastes is the same Spirit who inspired four different gospel accounts to give us one gospel message. Solomon examines life from multiple perspectives and differing angles. Each time he reaches a tentative conclusion, he sums it up. The arrangement of the book is not accidental or haphazard. Rather, there is organic connection between the parts—a spiral-like progression that brings a satisfying conclusion for the man or woman of faith.

We find in Ecclesiastes four movements or sections, marked out for us by four conclusions:

THE SHEPHERD KING'S WISDOM

- 1:2–2:26 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, far apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is [vapor] and a striving after wind. (2:24–26)
- 3:1–5:20 Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. (5:18–20)
- 6:1–8:15 And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. (8:15)
- 8:16–12:14 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (12:9–14)

I cannot simply state the conclusion for you. The purpose of Ecclesiastes can only be reached by *reading* it. I hope to help you read it, but there is no substitute for reading the book. It is like a poem. Poetry can be analyzed and summarized into certain basic themes or ideas a poet wants to convey, but to state the ideas in propositional form does *not* accurately reproduce the point of the poem. The words are supposed to change the reader in a way that cannot be duplicated by prose. Cognitive decoding may have its place, but it will not reach the poet's desired result. An analysis of a poem can help you understand it, but only if the poem itself is also read.

To understand Ecclesiastes, you have to go the whole way with Solomon through his writing, for he is not simply trying to state information, but to bring the reader to the point that he can actually grasp true wisdom. For that to happen, you must enter into his argument and into his experience. You must see in Ecclesiastes, mirrored for us, our own experiences as the people of God. You will also discern, as the argument of the book progresses, the fulfillment of Ecclesiastes in the life and teaching of Jesus, the greater Solomon. But I don't want to give away too much up front. At the end of the process you will have a better grasp of the truth. *Enjoy God's gifts of life while fearing him and keeping his commandments. God is in control. He will bring everything to a fitting and just conclusion. Faith will be satisfied with that.*