

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twelfth Week - Second Day

THE ARGUMENT OF ECCLESIASTES

Introductory Comment: There are a number of differing views scholars have on the book of Ecclesiastes. Dr. Kitto takes a somewhat different view than we do. However, since we have presented much of his excellent writings, we wanted to include his section on Ecclesiastes. We would encourage you to also read our interpretation based on the works of J. Stafford Wright and Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. It is found here on our Web site: ["The Words of Qoheleth: Ecclesiastes"](#). (Ken Morgan)

"The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright--words of truth. . . . Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:10-14).

Touched by many deep experiences of human and contrite for many errors, the author of Ecclesiastes (Solomon) resolves on devoting his energies to the composition of a work that should point out to his fellowmen wherein true happiness does and does not lie. At the very outset he warns his readers against forming too exalted an idea of life, since here no permanent and substantial good is to be obtained.

Having taken this work upon himself, and having stated (ch. 1) in the eleven introductory verses the main design of the ensuing chapters, *that anxious care over the acquisition of real earthly good must forever remain unrequited*, Solomon then proceeds to demonstrate the truth of this position from the events of his own history. He begins his inquiries (ch. 2) with a strict self-examination; and before he has cast a glance upon the outside world, he comes to the conclusion that physical enjoyment is an unworthy pursuit of a rational being. He was perfectly warranted in affirming this, for all the means of luxury stood at his command. He had tested them well and found them all equally worthless.

He does not, however, stop at this stage of his research; for he had resolved on exploring every path of human activity to the end, in order that his lack of success in the search after real earthly good might not be ascribed to the incompleteness of his investigation. Accordingly, he

next inquires into the value of intellectual attainments and the nature of the mind itself. But here, likewise, he meets with nothing satisfactory; for although wisdom is certainly preferable to folly, they are still both subject to the common lot of man. He encounters nothing but disappointments and is already induced to express himself disgusted with life.

He now passes to the external world (ch. 3). Solomon embarks upon a consideration of time and of mankind as existing in time. He investigates all that relates to the subject and finds indeed that God has ordered everything beautifully in time, and that everything is dependent upon Him. But yet he sees that men act unjustly toward each other and mutually embitter each other's lives. He perceives that the just are often wrongfully dealt with by human tribunals while the unjust are permitted to escape with impunity. The pious do not meet with their equitable reward in this life nor the wicked with their proper punishment. From this he draws the conclusion that God will judge them both and assign to the just their true reward and to the unjust their deserved doom. In this manner the Preacher shows that the grand argument for the belief in a system of rewards and punishments after death lies in the unjust treatment which men experience at one another's hands.

Having thus arrived at the idea of God, the Preacher next endeavors to ascertain the nature of the relationship existing between man and the Deity, with the view of discovering in what the superiority of man over all other creatures consists. He examines life in its various aspects but cannot perceive that man enjoys any essential superiority in his birth, his life, or his death; for in each of these the lot of every created being is in all important respects the same. He therefore concludes that the superiority is to be sought for in the future, after death, when the spirit of man rises to abide with God while that of the animal sinks into annihilation. In this consists the Preacher's second argument for the existence of a future state, so that he has already *twice* surmounted those formidable barriers that threaten to hurl him from their summits into the dark abyss of infidelity.

Having thus rescued his belief in the justice of God from the mazy labyrinths of speculation, he now can guide all those who would explore by the glimmering light of human reason the dark and hidden things of God and nature, and thereby be drawn into the imminent danger of perishing in its tortuous windings.

Again (ch. 4), the Preacher enters upon the world's wide stage to view the life of man as exhibited in society. And here a sad spectacle presents itself before his eyes. He beholds man weeping disconsolately for the wrongs inflicted by his fellow man. Touched with pity and grief he exclaims, "Happier are the dead, because they are already dead, than the living, because they are yet alive."¹ He proceeds still further and finds that all the labor and turmoil of men owe their origin to a mutual envy, and that this frequently assumes the hateful form of avarice. This causes men to hoard up treasures merely for the goal of being richer than their neighbors, while

1 The texts are quoted as translated or paraphrased in Dr. Nordheimer's (a late German Professor in an American University) Essay. It appeared in the *American Biblical Repository* for 1838, as translated by W. M. Turner from the German ms. of the author, and revised by him.

being themselves totally unable to enjoy any of the fruits of their greed. This sad experience suggests to him some reflections which he delivers in the shape of maxims, till he comes to consider the conduct to be observed in drawing near to God (ch. 5): "Be on your guard when you enter the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to offer the sacrifice of fools."

Being thus brought to an immediate consideration of the Deity, the Preacher goes on further to set forth the conduct which it behooves man to pursue toward his Creator, his discourse being mainly on sins of the tongue (to which men are so prone that they often fall into them through sheer inadvertence). He warns against wordy prayers and strongly insists on the due performance of vows.

Having laid down his precepts on the subject of our duty to God in regard to language, the Preacher returns to a consideration of the manifold evils that follow in the train of insatiable avarice; and these he places before the view of the covetous man with the intention of checking his thirst of gain. He advises him to enjoy with moderation the gifts of providence instead of striving incessantly to increase his store. The evils of avarice gather upon his mind as he surveys them, and he proceeds (ch. 6) to describe the wretchedness of inordinate greed. Solomon ends with setting forth the folly of the miser in allowing himself no enjoyment in this life, which he permits to pass from him like a shadow without knowing what the future is to bring forth.

The Preacher now (ch. 7) pauses in his course to lay down a number of additional maxims, the fruit of his preceding investigations. From the censure of folly he naturally passes to the praise of wisdom, by which he is led back to his main argument that man cannot penetrate the designs of God. From this he deduces the general principle of moderation in all things, which he seeks to impress upon the minds of men as their safest guide through the intricate paths of life. "All this have I tried by wisdom. I said I shall become wise; but it remained far from me." And again, "I applied with heart and soul to the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom; but I found at last that the fruits of this anxious desire to investigate all things were more bitter than death; and that he alone who trusts steadfastly in God, and to whom God is gracious, can escape with safety from the labyrinth in which such an undertaking must involve him."

We thus find that it is the design of the sacred writer to warn mankind against every species of ill-regulated desire by pointing out its evil consequences.

Having now completed his inquiries into the obligations of man to himself, the Preacher proceeds (ch. 8) to consider those which he owes to his fellowmen. He begins by prescribing the conduct to be observed toward the sovereign as the highest individual in human societies, fidelity to whom he enjoins as a primary duty. He then proceeds to treat of the punishments that await evil rulers. Let it be observed that in this chapter that the skeptical mode of arguing which he set out is abandoned; Solomon merely proposes questions to himself in order to show the manner in which he reaches his conclusions. Having done this, he proceeds to lay them down in the manner of a teacher. As already observed, he advises unshaken obedience to

the king, even should his reign be tyrannical, on the ground that the tyranny can be of no long duration and punishment must overtake it in the end.

He conducts the reader in imagination to the tombs of the tyrannous great ones, and represents them as consigned to eternal oblivion, which in the East is accounted the most severe of all inflictions, and then breaks out into the joyous exclamation, "Though the sinner do evil a hundred times, and carry it on long, sure I am that in the end it will be well with them that fear God." Yet to this pleasing conviction is immediately opposed the sad experience which seems to contradict it, that it frequently goes well with the wicked and ill with the good. This threatens to draw him once more into the vortex of materialism. But the Preacher says that as he endeavored with the greatest anxiety to find out the reason for all this, he became convinced that it is not in the power of man thoroughly to explore the works of God. And so this reflection again occurs to him as a delivering angel, to guide once more out of the dark labyrinth into which he had wandered.

Being thus led anew to the conviction that it is not possible for man to estimate the doings of God, the Preacher proceeds (ch. 9) to exert all his powers in vindicating the ways of the Most High. He asserts that all is under the control of God, that each individual thing is but a portion of the whole to which it belongs, and that nothing exists for itself alone or can rise independently above the rest of creation. Everything, therefore, must be viewed in the relation it bears to other existences if it is to be judged correctly. But as this is frequently beyond the power of man, he should ever guard against allowing himself to be misled by those isolated facts that are above his comprehension.

Yet, he says, it is still the greatest evil under the sun that one and the same lot seems to happen to all; for through their ignorance on the one hand and their presumption on the other, this leads men to the commission of crime by allowing them to entertain the idea that the condition of a living dog is better than that of a dead lion, since with death everything is at an end. This doctrine would lead to the conclusion that physical enjoyment is to be followed as the great good; for, says the deluded one, if during life there is no distinction made between the righteous and the wicked, how much less is distinction to be expected after death? The Preacher expresses his pity for mankind in this respect, and then leaves the reader to his own reflections.

The value of that practical wisdom which knows the limits of its own resources, and which had thus far guided him through his difficulties, the Preacher illustrates by a striking example. From it he draws the conclusion that wisdom is better than material power. He then (ch. 10) proceeds to lay down the maxims that his conviction of the supreme excellence of wisdom suggests. He had already recommended submission to the power that be, and he now describes the blessing that a good ruler, and the curse that an evil ruler, may be to a state. Solomon concludes with the advice not to conspire against the latter, however secretly, as it is impossible to tell how soon it may come to his knowledge.

Having thus completed his inquiries into the obligations of man to himself, to his fellowmen,

and to God, and having stated the results in the shape of maxims for the conduct of life, the Preacher proceeds (ch. 11) in the form of a peroration² to draw his subject to a close. He reverts once more to the duties which man owes to himself and instructs him in what manner to make use of his possessions and enjoy the blessings of this life. He counsels him not to strive incessantly after riches or selfishly appropriate his advantages to his own exclusive use. Neither should he pass his days in apathetic indolence but with cheerfulness and moderation enjoy the blooming season of his youth. He then pronounces (ch. 12) the noble precept which crowns the entire production: "Remember your Creator even in your youth; before the evil days come on, or the years draw nigh, when you shall say, I have no pleasure in them."

The work closes with a description of man's latter end, in which is depicted in faithful colors and with a master hand the gradual approach of old age, and finally of death. On reaching the grave, the Preacher suggests the consoling thought of an afterlife to be spent in the presence of God: "Then shall the dust of the body return to the earth from which it came; and the spirit shall ascend to dwell with its Giver on high."

2 The concluding part of a speech or discourse, in which the speaker or writer recapitulates the principal points and urges them with greater earnestness and force (dictionary.com).