# ECCLESIASTES
## AND SONG OF SONGS
### BIBLE STUDY

*A Verse-by-Verse Study*



*Life under the sun passes like a breath, and the fear of God gives it meaning; married love is God's good gift, strong like death and worth the wait*

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

# Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs Bible Study

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Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

**Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study**

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# A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Study

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this study direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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# Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to work through this verse-by-verse study of the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. My purpose in writing this study guide is the same as it was for my study of Revelation: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are two of the most surprising books in the Bible. Ecclesiastes is the honest search of a wise king who had everything this world can give and found that none of it could fill his heart. Song of Songs is a love poem that celebrates the joy of a husband and wife, a love that God Himself made and calls good. One book tells us that life without God is a breath that passes. The other tells us that the gifts God gives, love in marriage among them, are worth guarding and enjoying. I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible or on these books. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and learn how to live wisely and love faithfully in the short life He has given us. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

*2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)*

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal in both of these books. In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher often speaks about life "under the sun," life as it looks when we leave God out and look only at this world. Some of his sentences, pulled out by themselves, sound hopeless, and some people have built false teachings on them. He wrote that way on purpose, to show us where that road leads, and then he tells us how to read the whole book in his own words at the end: "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). If we skip the ending, we will misread the middle. Song of Songs needs its context too. It is poetry, a song, and its word pictures are meant to be felt, not measured. When the man says his bride's hair is "like the flock of the goats"

(Song of Songs 4:1), he is not describing goats. He is saying something about beauty in the language of his land and his day.

## Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

**Exegesis** means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

**Eisegesis** means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

**Hermeneutics** is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

*2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)*

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written, and that means reading each book as the kind of writing it is. Ecclesiastes is wisdom writing, the record of a real king's search, and I take it at its word. Song of Songs is a real love song about a real man and a real woman, and I read it first that way. Both books are poetry for much of their length. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme sounds. It rhymes thoughts. A line says something, and the next line says it again in other words, or adds to it, or gives its opposite. This is called parallelism. When the Preacher says, "A generation goes, and a generation comes" (Ecclesiastes 1:4), the second half answers the first. Once you see this, the poetry is easier to follow. A note on the name of God: in the SLB, when you see "the LORD" in capital letters, it stands for God's personal name, YHWH, often written Yahweh, which He made known to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14-15). When you see "God," it usually translates Elohim, the general Hebrew word for God. Ecclesiastes uses only the word God, never the LORD, and Song of Songs names the LORD only once (8:6). We will see why that matters when we get there.

This study uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) unless I note otherwise. To better understand the original Hebrew, I also used The Interlinear Bible (Jay P. Green Sr., ISBN 1-56563-977-4).

## How This Study Is Laid Out

Each chapter of this study follows the same pattern as my study of Revelation:

- Scripture: the full text of the chapter, broken into sections, so you can read it straight through first.
- Preview: a short look at what the chapter covers.
- Study: the chapter again, verse by verse, with my notes on what each verse says and what it means for us.
- Summary: the main points of the chapter in a few lines.
- Study Questions: questions for personal study or a small group, from simple fact questions to questions about how we live. Some of them are personal. In a group, no one should ever have to answer one aloud, and what is shared in the group stays there.

Each book also has its own Overview and Background before its first chapter, so you know who wrote it, when it was written, and why.

## Why Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs Are Studied Together

Both books open with Solomon's name or title. Ecclesiastes begins with "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1), and Song of Songs begins with "The song of the songs, which is of Solomon" (Song of Songs 1:1). In our English Bibles they sit side by side, right after Proverbs, the other book that carries Solomon's name. Many Bible teachers have noticed that the three books fit different seasons of one man's life: a young man's love song, a father's wise sayings, and an old man's look back. (In the Hebrew Bible both books are placed among the Writings, in a group of five short books that Jewish people came to read aloud at their yearly feasts.)

The two books also belong together in what they teach. Ecclesiastes shows that nothing under the sun can take the place of God. Wealth, work, pleasure, learning and fame all pass like a breath. But the Preacher never tells us to despise God's gifts. Again and again he says that food, work and joy are gifts "from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24), and he tells the reader, "See life with a wife whom you love" (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Song of Songs takes up that very gift and sings about it. Ecclesiastes warns us against making a good thing into a god. Song of Songs shows us how to receive a good gift with joy and keep it pure. One book ends with "fear God" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). The other ends its great song with a love that "Many waters are not able to quench" (Song of Songs 8:7). Both point past themselves to the One who gives life its meaning and who loves His people with a love stronger than death, Jesus Christ.

## Using This Study With a Group

This study works for one person or for a group. Ecclesiastes has twelve chapters and Song of Songs has eight, so here are two ways a group can pace it:

- One chapter a week: twenty weeks, about five months. If you like, add a first meeting to read the Introduction and the Background of Ecclesiastes together, and another before Song of Songs for its Background.
- Two chapters a week: ten weeks. Some chapters pair well (Ecclesiastes 1 and 2, 4 and 5, 10 and 11, Song of Songs 1 and 2, 5 and 6, 7 and 8). Take Ecclesiastes 3, 9 and 12 one at a time if you can, because they need the time, and Song of Songs 3 and 4 together tell of the wedding.

For each meeting, I suggest reading the Scripture out loud together first, straight through, before anyone comments. Then walk through the Study section, stopping where the group has questions, and finish with the Study Questions and prayer. The first questions in each list can be answered from the text. The later ones are more personal, and no one should feel pressed to answer them aloud.

Some parts of these books touch tender places. Ecclesiastes speaks plainly about death, grief, injustice and despair. The Preacher says, "I hated life" (Ecclesiastes 2:17), and he praises the dead above the living (4:2-3). He describes old age and dying in a long poem (12:1-7). Some in your group may be grieving, caring for aging parents, or fighting dark thoughts of their own. Read those chapters ahead of time and be ready to listen. Song of Songs speaks about love, desire and the joy of married intimacy. The study handles those passages modestly and plainly, in words fit for a church group, but leaders should still read ahead and think about who is in the room. Single people, widows and widowers, those in hard marriages, and those carrying hurt from the past may hear these chapters differently, and they need to hear that God's love for them does not depend on their marriage. If someone shares something that puts them or another person in danger, help them get help right away.

I look forward to walking with you through the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. If you'd like to share feedback, please email me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

May God bless you and your time studying and getting to know Him better.

# Overview of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is the twenty-first book of the Bible. In our English Bibles it comes after Proverbs and before Song of Songs, with Job and Psalms just before them. These five books are often called the books of wisdom and poetry. In the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes is placed among the Writings. Its Hebrew title is Qoheleth, the name the writer gives himself in the first verse. The SLB translates it "Preacher." The word comes from a Hebrew root that means to gather or assemble, so Qoheleth is one who gathers people together and speaks to them. The old Greek translation of the Old Testament turned that into Ekklesiastes, from the Greek word for an assembly, and that is where our English name comes from.

The book is the record of a search. The Preacher was a king with more wisdom, wealth and pleasure than anyone around him, and he set out to find what gives life lasting meaning. He tried learning. He tried laughter, wine, building projects, gardens, servants, money, music and women. He threw himself into work. And every time, he came back with the same answer: "Futility of futilities! Everything is futility" (1:2). The Hebrew word is hebel. It means a breath or a vapor, the little puff of steam you see on a cold morning, there for a moment and then gone. Many older Bibles translate it "vanity." The SLB translates it "futility." The point is not that life is worthless. The point is that nothing in this world lasts or satisfies by itself. It slips through our fingers like breath.

The Preacher's other key phrase is "under the sun." He uses it twenty-nine times. It describes life as it looks from ground level, with our eyes only on this world. Seen that way, the wise man and the fool both die, the righteous often suffer and the wicked often prosper, and the money we work for is left to someone else. The Preacher does not hide any of that. But he also keeps lifting his eyes above the sun. God gives food, work and joy as gifts (2:24-25; 3:13; 5:19). God has "put eternity in their heart" (3:11). God will judge every deed (3:17; 11:9; 12:14). The book does not end in despair. It ends with the whole duty of man:

*Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (SLB)*

"The end of the matter, everything has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this ***is*** all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil."

Ecclesiastes has 12 chapters and 222 verses. Here is its structure:

**Part One: Everything Is Futility (chapters 1 and 2)**

- Ecclesiastes 1: Everything Is Futility
- Ecclesiastes 2: The Search Through Pleasure and Work

**Part Two: Time, Work and the Ways of God (chapters 3 to 5)**

- Ecclesiastes 3: A Time for Everything
- Ecclesiastes 4: Oppression, Toil and the Strength of Two

- Ecclesiastes 5: Guard Your Steps Before God

**Part Three: Wisdom and Its Limits (chapters 6 to 8)**

- Ecclesiastes 6: Riches Without Rest
- Ecclesiastes 7: Wisdom for the Good Day and the Evil Day
- Ecclesiastes 8: The King, the Wicked and the Work of God

**Part Four: Living Well Under the Sun (chapters 9 to 11)**

- Ecclesiastes 9: One Fate for All, So Live Well Today
- Ecclesiastes 10: A Little Folly
- Ecclesiastes 11: Send Your Bread on the Waters

**Part Five: Remember Your Creator (chapter 12)**

- Ecclesiastes 12: Remember Your Creator

Where this book points to Christ: Ecclesiastes is not a book of prophecy, but it leaves an ache that only Christ fills. Paul writes that "the creation was subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20) because of sin, and that it waits in hope to be set free. The word Paul uses there is the same word the old Greek translation used for the Preacher's hebel. The Preacher saw the futility clearly. He could not see its end. Jesus Christ came and "abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). The Preacher asked, again and again, what advantage there is in all our toil. Paul answers for everyone who belongs to Christ: "your toil is not empty in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Solomon was the wisest king of Israel, but Jesus said, "something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). The wisdom the Preacher searched for is found in Him.

# Background of Ecclesiastes

**Author:** The writer calls himself "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), and says, "I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12). He says he had more wisdom, wealth, servants and pleasures than all who were before him in Jerusalem (1:16; 2:7-9), and that he "set in order many proverbs" (12:9). Only one son of David was king over all Israel in Jerusalem and fits that picture: Solomon. Jewish and Christian tradition have held that Solomon wrote the book, most likely late in his life. Many modern scholars, and some conservative scholars too, believe a later writer wrote it after the exile, in the 400s to 200s B.C., putting his words in Solomon's voice as a way of teaching. They point to some late Hebrew words and a few words borrowed from Persian, and to the way 1:12 says the Preacher "was king," as though looking back. Those who hold to Solomon answer that the language of wisdom writing is hard to date, that the words "was king" can simply mean he had been king for some time, and that the book's own claims point plainly to Solomon. I take the book at its word and believe Solomon is the Preacher. The closing verses (12:9-14) speak of the Preacher in the third person. Solomon may have written them about himself, as wise teachers sometimes did, or a later editor guided by the Holy Spirit may have added them.

**When it was written:** If Solomon wrote it, most likely late in his reign, about 935 B.C. Solomon ruled about 970 to 930 B.C. First Kings tells us that in his old age his many wives turned his heart toward other gods (1 Kings 11:4). Many Bible teachers believe Ecclesiastes is the fruit of an old king looking back on those wasted years and coming home to the fear of God. Scripture does not say that directly, but it fits the book well.

**Who it was written to:** The Preacher speaks to anyone who will listen, and twice to "my son" (12:12) or "young man" (11:9). It reads like an older man teaching younger people what he learned the hard way, so they will not waste their lives chasing the wind.

**Setting:** Jerusalem, in the golden age of Israel's kingdom. Solomon had peace on every side, built the temple and his own palace, and received gold from all over the world (1 Kings 10). No one was better placed to test whether this world can satisfy.

**Words to know:** Hebel means a breath or a vapor, and the SLB translates it "futility." It is the same word as the name of Abel (Hebel in Hebrew), whose short life passed like a breath (Genesis 4:8). "Under the sun" means life on this earth seen from a human point of view, without looking up to God. "A chasing of wind" (1:14) pictures work that gets you nowhere, like trying to catch the wind in your hands. "Portion" (2:10) means a share or lot in life, what God hands to each person to enjoy. "Fear God" (5:7; 12:13) means to hold God in such awe and trust that we obey Him above everything else.

**How to read the book:** The Preacher does not give us neat answers on every page. He thinks out loud. Sometimes he reports what life looks like under the sun, and sometimes he tells us what he knows is true about God. Both are true reports, but they are not the same thing. When he says that man has no advantage over the animals (3:19) or that "the dead do not know anything" (9:5), he is describing death as it looks from under the sun. When he says that God will bring every deed into

judgment (12:14), he is telling us what is true beyond the sun. The whole Bible is God's Word, and the Preacher's words are recorded truly, but we have to read each statement in light of the whole book and the whole Bible.

**Purpose:** Ecclesiastes was written to strip away every false hope that this world can give lasting meaning, to teach us to receive our daily bread, our work and our families as gifts from God's hand and enjoy them, and to turn us to the fear of God while we are still young enough to live it. It also prepares us for the gospel. A man who has learned that everything under the sun is a breath is ready to hear about the One who came down from above the sun to give us life that does not pass away.

# Ecclesiastes 1: Everything Is Futility

## Scripture

**1:1-11** The words of ***the*** Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. "Futility of futilities," said ***the*** Preacher, "futility of futilities! Everything ***is*** futility." What advantage ***is there*** for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, and the earth stands forever. And the sun rises, and the sun sets, and to its place it pants, rising there. Going to ***the*** south and circling to ***the*** north, circling, circling goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they return to go. All the things ***are*** wearisome; a man is not able to speak ***them***; an eye is not satisfied with seeing, and an ear is not filled from hearing. Whatever has been, it ***is*** what will be, and whatever has been done, it ***is*** what will be done; and there is not any new ***thing*** under the sun. Is there a thing of which one will say, "See this, it ***is*** new"? Already it has been in the ages which were before us. There is no remembrance of the former ***ones***; and also of the latter ***ones*** who will be, there will be no remembrance of them with those who will be at the last.

**1:12-18** I, ***the*** Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under the heavens. It ***is*** an evil task ***that*** God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it. I have seen all the works that have been done under the sun, and look, everything ***is*** futility and a chasing of wind. ***What is*** made crooked cannot become straight, and ***what is*** lacking cannot be counted. I myself spoke with my heart, saying, "I, look, I have made great and increased wisdom above everyone who was before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge." And I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I knew that this also is a striving of wind. For in abundance of wisdom ***is*** abundance of vexation, and ***whoever*** increases knowledge increases pain.

## Preview

The Preacher opens his book with a cry: "Futility of futilities! Everything is futility." Then he looks at the world around him. Generations come and go. The sun rises and sets. The wind circles. The rivers run into the sea, and the sea never fills. Nothing ever seems to finish, and nothing is really new. Even the people who came before us are forgotten.

In the second half of the chapter, the Preacher tells us who he is and what he set out to do. He was king over Israel in Jerusalem, and he gave his heart to explore everything done under the heavens by wisdom. What he found was that wisdom itself could not fix what is crooked, and that more knowledge only brought more pain. This chapter sets the question for the whole book: if this world is all there is, what is the point of it all?

## Study

**1:1** *The words of **the** Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

"The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." The writer does not give his name, but he gives enough for us to know him. He is a son of David, he is king, and he rules in Jerusalem. That is Solomon (see the Background). The title "Preacher" translates the Hebrew word Qoheleth, one who gathers an assembly and speaks to it. Solomon once gathered all Israel to dedicate the temple (1 Kings 8:1-2). Here he gathers us to hear what he learned about life.

Why would Solomon not give his name outright? Scripture does not tell us. Perhaps he wanted us to hear the lesson more than think about the man. The wisest and richest king in Israel's history is about to tell us that wisdom and riches cannot satisfy. That message carries extra weight coming from him.

**1:2** *"Futility of futilities," said **the** Preacher, "futility of futilities! Everything **is** futility."*

"Futility of futilities," said the Preacher, "futility of futilities! Everything is futility." In Hebrew, saying a word this way, "futility of futilities," makes it as strong as it can be, the way "holy of holies" (Exodus 26:33) means the most holy place. The Preacher is saying that everything is utterly, completely futile.

The word is hebel, a breath or a vapor. Many older Bibles translate it "vanity." Picture your breath on a cold morning. You see it for a moment, and then it is gone. You cannot hold it or store it. That is what the Preacher says about everything under the sun. It is real, but it does not last, and it cannot fill a human heart. James says the same about our lives: "it is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14).

Does that mean nothing matters? No. As we will see, the Preacher believes God matters, His commandments matter, and His judgment matters. He is saying that this world, cut off from God, cannot give us what we are looking for.

**1:3** *What advantage **is there** for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun?*

"What advantage is there for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun?" This is the question of the whole book. The word "advantage" means profit, something left over after all the work is done. Picture a merchant who adds up his books at the end of the year to see what he gained.

"Under the sun" is the Preacher's key phrase. It means life on this earth seen from ground level, with our eyes on this world alone. Under the sun, a man works all his life, and then he dies and leaves it all behind. What did he gain? The Preacher wants us to feel the weight of that question before he gives us any answer.

Jesus asked a question much like it: "For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world but suffers the loss of his life?" (Matthew 16:26). The answer is nothing.

**1:4-7** *A generation goes, and a generation comes, and the earth stands forever. And the sun rises, and the sun sets, and to its place it pants, rising there. Going to **the** south and circling to **the** north, circling, circling goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they return to go.*

Now the Preacher looks at nature, and he sees endless motion that never arrives anywhere. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, and the earth stands forever." People come and go like waves, but the earth stays. The ground we walk on was here before us and will be here after us.

"The sun rises, and the sun sets, and to its place it pants, rising there." The sun is pictured like a runner, panting as it hurries back around to rise again the next day. The wind goes south, then circles north, "circling, circling goes the wind." The rivers all run to the sea, "and the sea is not full," and the water goes back around to run again.

We might see beauty and order in these things, and in their place they are beautiful (3:11). But the Preacher is showing us the view from under the sun. Everything moves, and nothing finishes. The sun has been rising for thousands of years and is no closer to being done. If nature itself is on a treadmill, what hope does a man have of making a lasting mark?

**1:8** *All the things **are** wearisome; a man is not able to speak **them**; an eye is not satisfied with seeing, and an ear is not filled from hearing.*

"All the things are wearisome; a man is not able to speak them." There is too much of this endless cycle for words to describe. Then he turns to us: "an eye is not satisfied with seeing, and an ear is not filled from hearing."

This is one of the truest lines in the book. Have you ever noticed that seeing something new never satisfies for long? We want the next picture, the next song, the next headline. We scroll and click and watch, and we are never full. The human heart was made for more than this world can give. Only God can fill it.

**1:9-11** *Whatever has been, it **is** what will be, and whatever has been done, it **is** what will be done; and there is not any new **thing** under the sun. Is there a thing of which one will say, "See this, it **is** new"? Already it has been in the ages which were before us. There is no remembrance of the former **ones**; and also of the latter **ones** who will be, there will be no remembrance of them with those who will be at the last.*

"There is not any new thing under the sun." The Preacher does not mean that no one ever invents anything. He means that the basic patterns of life never change. People are born, work, love, fight, grow old and die. The tools change, but the human heart does not. Pride, greed, lust, fear and longing look the same in every age.

"Is there a thing of which one will say, See this, it is new?" Even what looks new "has been in the ages which were before us." Every generation thinks it is the first to face its problems. It is not.

"There is no remembrance of the former ones." This is a hard truth. How many of your great-great-grandparents can you name? Most of us cannot name them all. Under the sun, we are

forgotten within a few generations. The Preacher is not trying to be gloomy. He is showing us that if our hope rests on being remembered by people, it rests on a breath. But God does not forget His own. He knows His sheep by name (John 10:3), and the names of His people are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

**1:12-13** *I, **the** Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under the heavens. It **is** an evil task **that** God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it.*

"I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." Now the Preacher tells his own story. He had the power, the money and the time to search out anything he wanted.

"I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under the heavens." To give your heart to something means to throw your whole self into it. Solomon did not dabble. He studied everything. First Kings 4:33 says he spoke of trees, animals, birds, creeping things and fish. People came from all nations to hear his wisdom.

And what did he conclude? "It is an evil task that God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it." The word "evil" here means hard or painful, not wicked. God has made us to search for meaning, but under the sun, the search wears us out. Why would God give us such a task? Part of the answer is in Genesis 3. Since the fall, work and life have been under a curse (Genesis 3:17-19). The struggle we feel is meant to drive us back to God.

**1:14-15** *I have seen all the works that have been done under the sun, and look, everything **is** futility and a chasing of wind. **What is** made crooked cannot become straight, and **what is** lacking cannot be counted.*

"I have seen all the works that have been done under the sun, and look, everything is futility and a chasing of wind." Chasing the wind is a picture of effort that gets you nowhere. Try to catch the wind in your hand and close your fist. What do you have? Nothing.

Then comes a proverb: "What is made crooked cannot become straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted." Wisdom can see what is wrong with the world, but it cannot fix it. Some things are bent, and no human effort will straighten them. Some things are missing, and you cannot count what is not there. Later the Preacher will say that it is God who made some things crooked (7:13). Only God can make them straight. One day He will. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a day when the rough places would be made level for the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3-4), and John the Baptist applied that to the coming of Jesus (Luke 3:4-6).

**1:16-18** *I myself spoke with my heart, saying, "I, look, I have made great and increased wisdom above everyone who was before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge." And I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I knew that this also is a striving of wind. For in abundance of wisdom* ***is*** *abundance of vexation, and* ***whoever*** *increases knowledge increases pain.*

"I, look, I have made great and increased wisdom above everyone who was before me over Jerusalem." Solomon was not bragging. It was true. God had given him "a wise and discerning heart" (1 Kings 3:12).

"I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly." He wanted to understand both sides, to study wisdom and also to look closely at what fools do. And again he found "this also is a striving of wind."

Then he gives the sad conclusion of this first search: "For in abundance of wisdom is abundance of vexation, and whoever increases knowledge increases pain." The more you know, the more you see what is broken. A doctor who knows more about disease sees more danger. A man who studies history sees how often people repeat the same sins. Knowledge without God does not bring peace. It brings grief.

That does not mean we should stop learning. The Preacher will praise wisdom many times in this book (2:13; 7:12; 9:16-18). It means that knowledge by itself cannot heal the heart. Only knowing God can do that. Paul says that in Christ "all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden" (Colossians 2:3).

## Summary

The Preacher, the son of David and king in Jerusalem, opens his book with his theme: everything under the sun is futility, a breath that passes. He asks what a man gains from all his toil, and he points to the world around him: generations come and go, the sun, the wind and the rivers move in endless circles, the eye is never satisfied, nothing is truly new and no one is remembered. Then he tells his own story. As king he gave his heart to explore everything by wisdom, and he found that it was all a chasing of wind. Wisdom could not straighten what is crooked, and more knowledge only brought more pain. The chapter leaves us asking the question the rest of the book answers: if this world cannot satisfy, what can?

## Study Questions

1. How does the Preacher describe himself, and who do you believe he is? (1:1, 12)

2. What does the word futility (hebel, a breath or vapor) mean, and why do you think the Preacher repeats it? (1:2)

3. What question does the Preacher ask in verse 3, and what does "under the sun" mean? (1:3)

4. What examples from nature does the Preacher give of endless motion? (1:4-7)

5. What does he say about the eye and the ear? Where have you seen that to be true in your own life? (1:8)

6. In what sense is there nothing new under the sun? (1:9-10)

7. Why did the Preacher's great wisdom bring him vexation and pain? (1:16-18)

8. The Preacher says no one is remembered (1:11). How does it change things to know that God knows His people by name?

9. Where are you tempted to look for lasting meaning in things that pass like a breath?

10. What is one way you can bring your searching and your questions to God this week instead of carrying them alone?

# Ecclesiastes 2: The Search Through Pleasure and Work

## Scripture

**2:1-11** I myself said in my heart, "Come now, let me test you with joy, and see good." And look, this also ***was*** futility. Of laughter I said, "***It is*** mad," and of joy, "What does this do?" I searched in my heart to draw my flesh with wine, and my heart ***was*** guiding with wisdom, and to take hold of folly, until I might see where this ***is***, the good for the sons of man which they should do under the heavens ***for*** the number of the days of their life. I made my works great: I built for myself houses; I planted for myself vineyards. I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees of every ***kind of*** fruit. I made for myself pools of water to water from them a forest sprouting trees. I acquired male slaves and female slaves, and sons of ***the*** house were mine; also livestock, herds and flocks, much was mine, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I gathered for myself also silver and gold and the treasure of kings and the provinces; I acquired for myself male singers and female singers, and the delights of the sons of man, a concubine and concubines. And I became great and increased more than all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom stood by me. And all that my eyes asked I did not withhold from them; I did not restrain my heart from any joy, for my heart ***was*** joyful from all my toil, and this was my portion from all my toil. And I myself turned to all my works that my hands had done and to the toil that I had toiled to do, and look, everything ***was*** futility and a chasing of wind, and ***there was*** no advantage under the sun.

**2:12-26** And I myself turned to see wisdom and madness and folly; for what ***is*** the man who will come after the king? ***It is*** that which they have already done. And I myself saw that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, like the advantage of the light over the darkness. The wise man, his eyes ***are*** in his head, and the fool walks in the darkness; and I myself also knew that one fate happens to all of them. And I myself said in my heart, "Like the fate of the fool, it will happen to me, even me; and why then have I been excessively wise?" And I said in my heart that this also ***is*** futility. For there is no remembrance of the wise man with the fool forever, seeing that already ***in*** the coming days everything is forgotten. And how the wise man dies with the fool! And I hated life, for the work that was done under the sun ***was*** evil to me, for everything ***is*** futility and a chasing of wind. And I myself hated all my toil at which I toil under the sun, that I will leave it to the man who will be after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? And he will have power over all my toil at which I have toiled and at which I have been wise under the sun. This also ***is*** futility. And I myself turned to make my heart despair over all the toil at which I had toiled under the sun. For there is a man whose toil ***is*** with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill, and to a man who has not toiled in it he will give it ***as*** his portion. This also ***is*** futility and a great evil. For what comes to the man in all his toil and in the striving of his heart at which he toils under the sun? For all his days ***are*** pains, and his task ***is*** vexation; even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is futility. There is nothing good for man ***except*** that he should eat and drink and make his soul see good in his toil. This also I myself have seen, that it ***is*** from the hand of God. For who will eat, and who will enjoy, apart from me? For to a man who ***is*** good before Him He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; and to the sinner He gives a task, to gather and to collect, to give to ***one who is*** good before God. This also ***is*** futility and a chasing of wind.

## Preview

Wisdom alone did not satisfy the Preacher, so he tried pleasure. He tested laughter and wine. He built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens and pools, gathered servants, herds, silver and gold, singers and many women. He denied himself nothing his eyes wanted. When it was over, he looked at all of it and found that everything was futility and a chasing of wind.

Then he weighed wisdom against folly. Wisdom is better, like light is better than darkness, but the wise man and the fool die the same way and are forgotten the same way. That made him hate his toil, because he would leave it to someone who might be a fool. The chapter ends with the first ray of light in the book: eating, drinking and enjoying your work are good, and they come "from the hand of God."

## Study

**2:1-3** *I myself said in my heart, "Come now, let me test you with joy, and see good." And look, this also **was** futility. Of laughter I said, "**It is** mad," and of joy, "What does this do?" I searched in my heart to draw my flesh with wine, and my heart **was** guiding with wisdom, and to take hold of folly, until I might see where this **is**, the good for the sons of man which they should do under the heavens **for** the number of the days of their life.*

"Come now, let me test you with joy, and see good." The Preacher speaks to his own heart as if it were another person. He will run an experiment. If wisdom cannot satisfy, maybe pleasure can. The answer comes right away, before he even tells us the details: "this also was futility."

"Of laughter I said, It is mad." Laughter is not wrong. There is "a time to laugh" (3:4). But laughter as a way of life, a constant search for the next good time, is madness. It covers the emptiness for a moment and then leaves it bigger.

"I searched in my heart to draw my flesh with wine." Notice that he says his "heart was guiding with wisdom" the whole time. He was not a drunk who lost control. He was a careful scientist, trying wine and folly to see whether they held the good that men are looking for "the number of the days of their life." Many people today run the same test. They try one pleasure after another, hoping the next one will fill the hole. Solomon ran the test with more money than anyone, and he tells us how it came out.

**2:4-6** *I made my works great: I built for myself houses; I planted for myself vineyards. I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees of every **kind of** fruit. I made for myself pools of water to water from them a forest sprouting trees.*

"I made my works great." Now the Preacher lists his great projects. "I built for myself houses; I planted for myself vineyards." First Kings tells us Solomon spent thirteen years building his own palace (1 Kings 7:1), plus a house for Pharaoh's daughter and the House of the Forest of Lebanon.

"I made for myself gardens and parks." The word for parks is the word from which we get "paradise." It means a walled garden full of trees. He planted "trees of every kind of fruit" and made "pools of water" to water a whole forest.

Notice how often he says "for myself." Everything was for himself. There is nothing wrong with building a house or planting a garden. God put Adam in a garden. But a life built only "for myself" ends up empty, because the self is too small a thing to live for.

**2:7-8** *I acquired male slaves and female slaves, and sons of **the** house were mine; also livestock, herds and flocks, much was mine, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I gathered for myself also silver and gold and the treasure of kings and the provinces; I acquired for myself male singers and female singers, and the delights of the sons of man, a concubine and concubines.*

"I acquired male slaves and female slaves." Solomon had a huge household. Servants were born in his house, and he had "livestock, herds and flocks," more than anyone before him in Jerusalem. One day's food for his household is listed in 1 Kings 4:22-23, and it is staggering.

"I gathered for myself also silver and gold and the treasure of kings and the provinces." In Solomon's day, silver was as common as stones in Jerusalem (1 Kings 10:27). He also had "male singers and female singers," the best music money could buy.

Then the list ends with "the delights of the sons of man, a concubine and concubines." The Hebrew words here are rare, and translators are not sure of them, but most understand them to mean many women. First Kings 11:3 tells us Solomon "had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." A concubine was a secondary wife, with fewer rights than a full wife. Solomon broke God's law for kings, which said a king must not "multiply wives" or great amounts of silver and gold (Deuteronomy 17:17). The next words in 1 Kings 11:3 are sad: "his wives turned aside his heart." What he thought would bring delight led him away from God.

**2:9-11** *And I became great and increased more than all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom stood by me. And all that my eyes asked I did not withhold from them; I did not restrain my heart from any joy, for my heart **was** joyful from all my toil, and this was my portion from all my toil. And I myself turned to all my works that my hands had done and to the toil that I had toiled to do, and look, everything **was** futility and a chasing of wind, and **there was** no advantage under the sun.*

"I became great and increased more than all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom stood by me." He had it all, and he kept his head while he got it.

"All that my eyes asked I did not withhold from them; I did not restrain my heart from any joy." Have you ever thought that if you just had more money, more freedom and more fun, then you would be happy? Solomon had all three without limit. He even found some joy in the work itself: "my heart was joyful from all my toil, and this was my portion." The pleasure was real. It just did not last.

"I myself turned to all my works that my hands had done," and "look, everything was futility and a chasing of wind, and there was no advantage under the sun." When the party was over, he looked back and found nothing left in his hands. No profit. Only wind. The pleasures of this world are like cotton candy. They taste sweet, and they melt away, and you are still hungry.

**2:12-14** *And I myself turned to see wisdom and madness and folly; for what **is** the man who will come after the king? **It is** that which they have already done. And I myself saw that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, like the advantage of the light over the darkness. The wise man, his eyes **are** in his head, and the fool walks in the darkness; and I myself also knew that one fate happens to all of them.*

"I myself turned to see wisdom and madness and folly." Having tried pleasure, he turns to compare wisdom and folly again. He asks, "what is the man who will come after the king?" In other words, who could run this test better than he did? Anyone who comes after will only repeat what has already been done.

He finds that wisdom does have a real advantage: "there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, like the advantage of the light over the darkness." The wise man sees where he is going. "The wise man, his eyes are in his head, and the fool walks in the darkness." Wisdom helps you avoid a lot of pain in life.

"And I myself also knew that one fate happens to all of them." Here is the problem. Both the wise man and the fool die. Under the sun, death erases the difference between them.

**2:15-17** *And I myself said in my heart, "Like the fate of the fool, it will happen to me, even me; and why then have I been excessively wise?" And I said in my heart that this also **is** futility. For there is no remembrance of the wise man with the fool forever, seeing that already **in** the coming days everything is forgotten. And how the wise man dies with the fool! And I hated life, for the work that was done under the sun **was** evil to me, for everything **is** futility and a chasing of wind.*

"Like the fate of the fool, it will happen to me, even me; and why then have I been excessively wise?" Solomon feels the sting personally. All his wisdom will not keep him out of the grave.

"There is no remembrance of the wise man with the fool forever." In a few generations, both are forgotten. "And how the wise man dies with the fool!" You can hear his anger in those words.

"And I hated life." This is one of the darkest lines in the Bible. The wisest man of his day looked at a life that ends in death and forgetting, and he hated it. He is honest about his feelings, and Scripture records them truly. Many people have felt this way. If you have, you are not alone, and God is not shocked by it. But the Preacher's feelings are not the end of the book. He is showing us what life looks like without the hope of God, so that we will look higher. If you are in that dark place right now, please talk with someone you trust today, a pastor, a friend, or a counselor, and tell God about it. He hears.

**2:18-21** *And I myself hated all my toil at which I toil under the sun, that I will leave it to the man who will be after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? And he will have power over all my toil at which I have toiled and at which I have been wise under the sun. This also **is** futility. And I myself turned to make my heart despair over all the toil at which I had toiled under the sun. For there is a man whose toil **is** with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill, and to a man who has not toiled in it he will give it **as** his portion. This also **is** futility and a great evil.*

"I myself hated all my toil," he says, "that I will leave it to the man who will be after me." Solomon built a kingdom, and he knew he could not take any of it with him. Worse, "who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?" The man who comes after "will have power over all my toil."

This came true. Solomon's son Rehoboam was foolish. He refused wise counsel, spoke harshly to the people, and ten of the twelve tribes broke away from him (1 Kings 12:1-20). Much of what Solomon built was divided within days of his son taking the throne.

"I myself turned to make my heart despair." A man works hard "with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill," and then he gives it all to someone "who has not toiled in it." That is "futility and a great evil." Anyone who has built a business, a ministry, or a home and watched someone else waste it knows this pain.

**2:22-23** *For what comes to the man in all his toil and in the striving of his heart at which he toils under the sun? For all his days **are** pains, and his task **is** vexation; even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is futility.*

"For what comes to the man in all his toil and in the striving of his heart?" The Preacher asks again what the profit is. His answer is bleak: "all his days are pains, and his task is vexation; even in the night his heart does not rest."

Have you ever lain awake at night with your mind still working? Under the sun, work follows us home. We worry and plan and fret. Psalm 127:2 says, "It is in vain for you who rise early to get up, who delay sitting down, who eat the bread of toils; so He gives to His beloved sleep." The rest we cannot find by working harder is a gift God gives to those who trust Him.

**2:24-26** *There is nothing good for man **except** that he should eat and drink and make his soul see good in his toil. This also I myself have seen, that it **is** from the hand of God. For who will eat, and who will enjoy, apart from me? For to a man who **is** good before Him He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; and to the sinner He gives a task, to gather and to collect, to give to **one who is** good before God. This also **is** futility and a chasing of wind.*

Now the clouds part. "There is nothing good for man except that he should eat and drink and make his soul see good in his toil." After all his searching, the Preacher comes back to the simple things: a meal, a drink, the satisfaction of a day's work.

Is he telling us to live for pleasure? No. He has just spent eleven verses showing that pleasure as a goal is empty. The key is the next line: "This also I myself have seen, that it is from the hand of God." The difference is not in the food. It is in where we see it coming from. The man who lives for

pleasure grabs at it, and it slips away. The man who receives his daily bread from God's hand can enjoy it with thanks. Paul says God "provides us all things richly for enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17).

This is very different from the motto of the godless, "let us eat and let us drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). That motto says, grab what you can because nothing matters. The Preacher says, receive what God gives, because He is the giver. Jesus told of a rich fool who said to his soul, "rest, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19), and God said to him, "Fool! This night they are demanding your soul from you" (Luke 12:20). The rich fool left God out. The Preacher puts God at the center.

"For who will eat, and who will enjoy, apart from me?" The Hebrew here can be read two ways. Some old copies and translations read apart from Him, meaning no one can truly enjoy anything apart from God. Others read "apart from me," with Solomon saying that no one had more to enjoy than he did. Either way, the point of the next verse is clear.

"For to a man who is good before Him He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy." God gives the ability to enjoy life to those who please Him. "To the sinner He gives a task, to gather and to collect, to give to one who is good before God." The sinner works hard and gathers, but in the end what he gathered goes to someone else. Proverbs 13:22 says the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.

"This also is futility and a chasing of wind." Even this pattern, under the sun, does not answer the Preacher's deepest question. But we have our first clear signpost. Joy is real, and it comes from God.

## Summary

The Preacher tested pleasure: laughter, wine, great building projects, gardens and parks, servants and herds, silver and gold, music and many women. He denied himself nothing, but when he looked back it was all futility and a chasing of wind. He then compared wisdom and folly. Wisdom is better, like light over darkness, but the wise man and the fool share the same death and are forgotten alike, and this made him hate life and hate his toil, because he must leave it to someone who might be a fool. Yet the chapter ends with the first clear light in the book. Eating, drinking and finding good in our work are good things, and they come from the hand of God, who gives wisdom, knowledge and joy to the one who pleases Him.

## Study Questions

1. What did the Preacher test first, and what did he conclude about laughter? (2:1-2)

2. List some of the things Solomon built and gathered. What words does he keep repeating? (2:4-8)

3. What did he find when he looked back over all his works? (2:11)

4. What advantage does wisdom have over folly, and what does wisdom not change? (2:13-16)

5. Why did the Preacher hate his toil? (2:18-21)

6. How did Solomon's fear about the man after him come true? (1 Kings 12)

7. According to verse 24, where do food, drink and good work come from? How is that different from living for pleasure? (2:24)

8. Why do you think the Preacher was so honest about hating life? What does that teach us about bringing our feelings to God? (2:17)

9. What have you chased, hoping it would satisfy, that did not?

10. What is one ordinary gift from God's hand that you can thank Him for and enjoy this week?

# Ecclesiastes 3: A Time for Everything

## Scripture

**3:1-15** For everything ***there is*** an appointed time, and a time for every matter under the heavens: a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to be far from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace. What advantage ***has*** the worker in that at which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also He has put eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing good for them except to rejoice and to do good in his life. And also every man who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil, it ***is*** a gift of God. I know that all that God does, it will be forever; to it there is nothing to add, and from it there is nothing to take away; and God has done ***it*** so that they will fear before Him. Whatever is, already it has been, and what is to be has already been; and God seeks what is pursued.

**3:16-22** And still I have seen under the sun: the place of justice, there ***is*** wickedness, and the place of righteousness, there ***is*** wickedness. I myself said in my heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for ***there is*** a time for every matter and for every deed there." I myself said in my heart concerning the matter of the sons of man, "***It is*** for God to test them, and to see that they themselves ***are*** animals." For the fate of the sons of man and the fate of the animal, even one fate ***is*** theirs: as the death of this, so ***is*** the death of that, and one spirit ***is*** for all; and the advantage of man over the animal ***is*** nothing, for everything ***is*** futility. Everything goes to one place; everything was from the dust, and everything returns to the dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of man, the ***one*** that goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, the ***one*** that goes down below to the earth? And I saw that there is nothing better than that man should rejoice in his works, for that ***is*** his portion; for who will bring him to see what will be after him?

## Preview

This is one of the best known passages in the Bible. "For everything there is an appointed time." The Preacher lists fourteen pairs of opposites, from birth and death to war and peace, and shows that every season of life comes and goes under God's hand. We do not set the times. God does.

Then the Preacher reflects on what that means. God has made everything beautiful in its time and has put eternity in our hearts, yet we cannot see the whole of His work. What God does lasts forever, and He does it so that people will fear Him. In the second half, the Preacher sees injustice in the courts, reminds himself that God will judge, and then looks at death from under the sun: man and beast both die and return to the dust. That passage is often misused, and we will take time with it.

## Study

**3:1** *For everything **there is** an appointed time, and a time for every matter under the heavens:*

"For everything there is an appointed time, and a time for every matter under the heavens." The Hebrew has two words for time here. The first means a set time, an appointment. The second means a season or occasion. Together they say that nothing in our lives happens by chance. There is a time for each thing, and the times are in God's hands.

Chapters 1 and 2 showed us life spinning in endless circles. Now the Preacher shows us that the circles are not out of control. They move on God's schedule. David said, "My times are in Your hand" (Psalm 31:15). The same God who appointed the seasons appointed "the fullness of the time" when He "sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4).

**3:2-4** *a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;*

Now comes the poem. Each line has two pairs, and each pair is opposites. This is Hebrew parallelism, and the opposites are meant to cover everything in between, the way we say from head to toe and mean the whole body.

"A time to give birth and a time to die." The poem starts where life starts and ends. We did not choose the day we were born, and we will not choose the day we die. Both are set by God.

"A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted." Every farmer knows this. You cannot plant in harvest season or harvest in planting season.

"A time to kill and a time to heal." This does not give anyone permission to murder. God's law forbids murder (Exodus 20:13). But Scripture does recognize times when life is taken lawfully: the government bearing the sword against evil (Romans 13:4), a just war, the slaughter of animals for food. Some also take it to mean the killing of sick animals or the end of a hopeless struggle. And there is a time to heal, to bind up and restore.

"A time to break down and a time to build." Old walls come down so new ones can go up.

"A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." Life has funerals and weddings. Paul tells us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). A wise person knows which time it is. Have you ever seen someone tell jokes at a funeral, or lecture people at a wedding? They did not know the time.

**3:5-8** *a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to be far from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace.*

"A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones." Scripture does not tell us exactly what this means. Some think of a farmer clearing his field of stones and then gathering stones to build a wall. Some think of an army throwing stones into an enemy's field to ruin it (2 Kings 3:19, 25). Either way, the point is the same: there is a time for each.

"A time to embrace and a time to be far from embracing." There is a time for closeness and a time to hold back. This can mean the embrace of friends and family, or the embrace of husband and wife, which Paul says may be set aside for a short time of prayer by agreement (1 Corinthians 7:5).

"A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away." Sometimes we search for what we lost. Sometimes we have to let go. Wisdom knows when to hold on and when to release.

"A time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak." In Israel, people tore their clothes in grief (Genesis 37:34). When the grief was over, the cloth was sewn. In the same way, there is a time to keep quiet with someone who is hurting, and a time to speak up for what is right. Job's friends did well when they sat with him in silence for seven days (Job 2:13). They did worse when they started talking.

"A time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace." Can there be a right time to hate? Scripture says we are to hate evil: "You who love the LORD, hate evil!" (Psalm 97:10), and "Abhorring the evil, clinging to the good" (Romans 12:9). We hate sin because we love what God loves. And there are times of war and times of peace among nations. The poem ends with peace, and that is where God's story ends too, when the Prince of Peace reigns (Isaiah 9:6-7).

What is the lesson of the whole poem? We do not control the seasons. We can only learn to recognize them and to live faithfully in each one.

**3:9-10** *What advantage **has** the worker in that at which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it.*

"What advantage has the worker in that at which he toils?" The Preacher comes back to his question from 1:3. If everything has its time and the times are set by God, what can a man add by his labor?

"I have seen the task which God has given to the sons of man to be occupied with it." In 1:13 he called it an evil task. Here he simply names it. God has given us work to do and a world to puzzle over. That is our lot.

**3:11** *He has made everything beautiful in its time; also He has put eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from beginning to end.*

This verse is one of the high points of the whole book.

"He has made everything beautiful in its time." God's timing is good. A season that feels painful while we are in it may later be seen as part of something beautiful. Joseph learned that. Sold as a slave and thrown into prison, he later told his brothers, "you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Genesis 50:20). We may not see the beauty now, but God has made everything beautiful in its time.

"Also He has put eternity in their heart." This is one of the deepest statements in Scripture about what it means to be human. God has placed in every person a sense that there is more than this life. Animals do not lie awake wondering what it all means. We do. We long for things to last. We grieve when they end. We feel that death is wrong. Why? Because God made us for eternity, and He wrote that longing into our hearts. That is why nothing under the sun can satisfy us. We were made for more than the sun.

"Yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from beginning to end." Here is the tension. We have eternity in our hearts, but we cannot see eternity's whole plan. We see a few frames of the film, not the whole story. God sees "the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10). We see only the part we are living. So we must trust Him.

How does this point us to Christ? The longing for eternity God put in our hearts is answered in Jesus. He came to give "eternal life" to everyone who believes in Him (John 3:16). Paul says that one day we will see "face to face" and "fully know, even as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The puzzle we cannot finish now, God will finish for us.

**3:12-13** *I know that there is nothing good for them except to rejoice and to do good in his life. And also every man who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil, it **is** a gift of God.*

"I know that there is nothing good for them except to rejoice and to do good in his life." Since we cannot see the whole plan, what should we do? Rejoice and do good. Enjoy the life God gives and use it to bless others.

"Also every man who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil, it is a gift of God." This is the second time the Preacher has said it (2:24). The simple joys of life are not something we earn. They are gifts. Even the ability to enjoy them is a gift.

**3:14-15** *I know that all that God does, it will be forever; to it there is nothing to add, and from it there is nothing to take away; and God has done **it** so that they will fear before Him. Whatever is, already it has been, and what is to be has already been; and God seeks what is pursued.*

"I know that all that God does, it will be forever; to it there is nothing to add, and from it there is nothing to take away." Our work passes like a breath. God's work does not. No one can improve on what God does, and no one can undo it.

Why does God work this way? "God has done it so that they will fear before Him." God's unchanging, unstoppable work is meant to bring us to our knees in awe. When we see how small and brief we are and how great and lasting He is, the right response is to fear Him, to trust and obey Him.

"Whatever is, already it has been, and what is to be has already been." This echoes 1:9. Then: "God seeks what is pursued." The phrase is hard. Many take it to mean that God calls the past to account. What has been driven away, He brings back. Nothing slips out of His reach, and no deed is lost. That leads straight into the next verse about judgment.

**3:16-17** *And still I have seen under the sun: the place of justice, there **is** wickedness, and the place of righteousness, there **is** wickedness. I myself said in my heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for **there is** a time for every matter and for every deed there."*

"I have seen under the sun: the place of justice, there is wickedness, and the place of righteousness, there is wickedness." The courts, where justice should be done, are corrupt. The judges who should punish evil practice it. That is still true in many places today.

But the Preacher does not stop there. "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every deed there." The word "there" may point to God's courtroom, or to a time still to come. Either way, the season poem has a last appointment no one can skip: God's judgment. Hebrews 9:27 says "it is appointed to men to die once, and after this judgment." Injustice under the sun is real, but it is not the last word.

**3:18-21** *I myself said in my heart concerning the matter of the sons of man, "**It is** for God to test them, and to see that they themselves **are** animals." For the fate of the sons of man and the fate of the animal, even one fate **is** theirs: as the death of this, so **is** the death of that, and one spirit **is** for all; and the advantage of man over the animal **is** nothing, for everything **is** futility. Everything goes to one place; everything was from the dust, and everything returns to the dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of man, the **one** that goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, the **one** that goes down below to the earth?*

These verses need care, because they are often pulled out of context to teach that people are just animals, or that there is no life after death.

"It is for God to test them, and to see that they themselves are animals." God lets people see something humbling: in their bodies and in their deaths, they are like the animals. The Preacher is not saying people are only animals. He is saying that when you look at death from under the sun, you cannot tell the difference.

"For the fate of the sons of man and the fate of the animal, even one fate is theirs: as the death of this, so is the death of that, and one spirit is for all." Both breathe. Both die. The word for "spirit" here also means breath. "Everything was from the dust, and everything returns to the dust." That is exactly what God told Adam: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). On that level, a man and a dog end the same way. Psalm 49:12 says the same: man "is like the animals that are destroyed."

"Who knows the spirit of the sons of man, the one that goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, the one that goes down below to the earth?" The Preacher asks the question that no one can answer by looking at a grave. Who can see where the spirit goes? Under the sun, no one knows.

So what does the rest of Scripture say? The Preacher himself gives part of the answer later: at death "the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:7). Man is not like the animals. Only man was made "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27), and only into man did God breathe "the breath of life" with His own breath (Genesis 2:7). The Old Testament gave glimpses of more: "God will ransom my soul from the hand of Sheol" (Psalm 49:15), and Daniel saw that "many of those who sleep in the ground of dust will awake, these to everlasting life" (Daniel 12:2).

But the full light came with Jesus. Paul says our Savior Christ Jesus "abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). What the Preacher could only wonder about, Jesus showed by rising from the dead. He told the thief on the cross, "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Paul said that to be "absent out of the body" is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). A believer's spirit does not die with the body or sleep in the grave. It goes to be with Christ, and one day the body will be raised too.

The Preacher's question is honest, and it is the right question to ask. If all we have is what we can see, death looks the same for man and beast. That is why we need God to tell us what lies beyond the sun. He has, in His Son.

**3:22** *And I saw that there is nothing better than that man should rejoice in his works, for that **is** his portion; for who will bring him to see what will be after him?*

"I saw that there is nothing better than that man should rejoice in his works, for that is his portion." Since we cannot see what lies after us, the Preacher returns to his counsel: enjoy the work God gives you today. It is your share, your portion.

"For who will bring him to see what will be after him?" No one under the sun can show us the future. We are called to live faithfully in the present and leave the future with God. Jesus taught the same when He told us not to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34). Today has enough for us to do, and God is already in tomorrow.

## Summary

The Preacher teaches that there is an appointed time for everything under the heavens, and he lists fourteen pairs of opposites, from birth and death to war and peace, to show that every season of life is in God's hands. God has made everything beautiful in its time and has put eternity in our hearts, though we cannot see the whole of His work. So we are to rejoice, do good and receive our food and work as gifts of God. What God does lasts forever, and He does it so people will fear Him. The Preacher sees injustice in the courts but knows that God will judge. He then looks at death from under the sun: man and beast both die and return to the dust, and no one can see where the spirit goes. The rest of Scripture, and above all the resurrection of Jesus, gives the answer the Preacher could not see from the ground.

When I look back at my hardest season, I can see something God made beautiful in its time: the final outcome, and where I am now. I could not see it then. Ecclesiastes 3 says He makes everything beautiful in its time. I believe that now.

## Study Questions

1. What does the Preacher say about times and seasons in verse 1? (3:1)

2. Pick two pairs from the poem and explain what they mean. (3:2-8)

3. How does the Bible help us understand "a time to kill" and "a time to hate"? (3:3, 8)

4. What has God put in our hearts, and what can we still not find out? (3:11)

5. Why does God do His work in a way that cannot be added to or taken away from? (3:14)

6. What does the Preacher see in the place of justice, and what does he know God will do? (3:16-17)

7. In what way are man and beast alike, according to the Preacher? How does 12:7 and the rest of Scripture show that people are not the same as animals? (3:18-21)

8. What season of life are you in right now? What would it look like to live faithfully in it?

9. Think of a hard season in your past. Can you now see anything God made beautiful in its time?

10. How does the hope of the resurrection change the way you face death, your own or someone else's?

# Ecclesiastes 4: Oppression, Toil and the Strength of Two

## Scripture

**4:1-8** And I myself returned and saw all the oppressions which are done under the sun, and look, the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter; and from the hand of their oppressors ***there is*** power, and they have no comforter. And I myself praised the dead who have already died more than the living who are still alive. And better than both of them ***is the one*** who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun. And I myself saw all the toil and all the skill of the work, that it ***is*** the envy of a man toward his neighbor. This also ***is*** futility and a chasing of wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better ***is*** a palmful of quietness than two fistfuls of toil and a chasing of wind. And I myself returned and saw futility under the sun: There is one, and there is no second; also he has no son or brother, and there is no end to all his toil; also his eye is not satisfied with wealth. "And for whom am I toiling and depriving my soul of good?" This also ***is*** futility, and it ***is*** an evil task.

**4:9-16** The two ***are*** better than the one, in that they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, the one will raise up his companion; and woe to him, the one who falls and there is no second to raise him up. Also if two lie down, then it will be warm for them; and for one, how will it be warm? And though ***someone*** may overpower the one, the two will stand against him; and the threefold cord will not quickly be torn apart. Better ***is*** a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knows ***how*** to be warned. For from the house of the prisoners he came out to reign, for even in his kingdom he was born poor. I saw all the living who walk about under the sun with the youth, the second, who will stand in his place. There is no end to all the people, to all before whom he was; also the latter ***ones*** will not rejoice in him. For this also ***is*** futility and a striving of wind.

## Preview

The Preacher looks again at life under the sun, and this time he sees people. He sees the tears of the oppressed with no one to comfort them. He sees that much hard work is driven by envy. He sees the lazy fool who ruins himself, and the lonely man who works without end and never asks who he is working for.

Then the chapter turns warm. "The two are better than the one." Friends lift each other up, keep each other warm and stand together, and "the threefold cord will not quickly be torn apart." The chapter ends with a short story about a poor, wise youth who becomes king, and how quickly even he is forgotten. Power and popularity pass like everything else.

## Study

**4:1** *And I myself returned and saw all the oppressions which are done under the sun, and look, the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter; and from the hand of their oppressors* ***there is*** *power, and they have no comforter.*

"I myself returned and saw all the oppressions which are done under the sun." The Preacher was a king, but he did not close his eyes to the suffering of the weak. He saw "the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter." Twice in one verse he says it: "they have no comforter." The oppressors had power. The oppressed had only tears.

This is a hard picture, and it is still true. The poor are cheated. The weak are pushed aside. Workers are not paid. Children are hurt. Under the sun, it often seems no one cares. But God sees. He told Moses, "I have certainly seen the affliction of My people" (Exodus 3:7). And Jesus promised His followers "another Helper," the Holy Spirit, who would be with them forever (John 14:16). In Christ, the oppressed are not without comfort. God's people are also called to be comforters, to stand with those who suffer and speak up for them (Proverbs 31:8-9).

**4:2-3** *And I myself praised the dead who have already died more than the living who are still alive. And better than both of them* ***is the one*** *who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun.*

"I myself praised the dead who have already died more than the living who are still alive." When the Preacher looked at so much suffering, he felt that the dead were better off. They no longer had to see it or bear it. "And better than both of them is the one who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun."

Job felt the same in his pain (Job 3:11-13), and so did Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-18). Scripture is honest that suffering can make a person wish he had never been born. These words are recorded truly, but they are a cry of grief, not a teaching that life is worthless. The same book says, "a living dog, it is better than the dead lion" (9:4), and that "the light is sweet" (11:7). Life is a gift from God. If you have ever felt that the dead were better off, tell God, and tell someone who can help. God is near to the brokenhearted.

**4:4** *And I myself saw all the toil and all the skill of the work, that it* ***is*** *the envy of a man toward his neighbor. This also* ***is*** *futility and a chasing of wind.*

"I myself saw all the toil and all the skill of the work, that it is the envy of a man toward his neighbor." Why do people work so hard? Often it is to keep up with the neighbor, or to get ahead of him. We want a bigger house, a better car, a higher position. The Preacher calls it what it is: envy.

"This also is futility and a chasing of wind." Envy is never satisfied, because there is always someone who has more. The tenth commandment says, "You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:17). Hard work is good, but work driven by envy eats away at the soul.

**4:5-6** *The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better **is** a palmful of quietness than two fistfuls of toil and a chasing of wind.*

Now the opposite error. "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh." The lazy man sits with his hands in his lap, and in the end he consumes himself. He ruins his life by doing nothing. Proverbs says much the same: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to lie down," and poverty comes like a robber (Proverbs 6:10-11).

So what is the right path? "Better is a palmful of quietness than two fistfuls of toil and a chasing of wind." Picture one open hand holding a little, with peace, and two clenched fists full of work and worry. The Preacher says the one hand is better. Do not be lazy, and do not be a workaholic. Work enough, and be content. Paul says that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

**4:7-8** *And I myself returned and saw futility under the sun: There is one, and there is no second; also he has no son or brother, and there is no end to all his toil; also his eye is not satisfied with wealth. "And for whom am I toiling and depriving my soul of good?" This also **is** futility, and it **is** an evil task.*

"I myself returned and saw futility under the sun." Here is a man all alone: "there is one, and there is no second; also he has no son or brother." He has no family, no one to share with and no one to leave anything to. Yet "there is no end to all his toil; also his eye is not satisfied with wealth."

Then the Preacher puts words in his mouth, the question he never asked himself: "And for whom am I toiling and depriving my soul of good?" He works and works, and he never enjoys any of it, and he has no one to give it to. "This also is futility, and it is an evil task."

Do you know anyone like that? Maybe you are like that. A man can build a fortune and lose his family, his friends and his health in the process. Jesus asked the rich fool, "the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20). Wealth gathered for no one is a sad waste of a life.

**4:9-10** *The two **are** better than the one, in that they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, the one will raise up his companion; and woe to him, the one who falls and there is no second to raise him up.*

Now the chapter turns from loneliness to friendship. "The two are better than the one, in that they have a good reward for their toil." Two people working together get more done, and they share the reward.

"For if they fall, the one will raise up his companion." Picture two travelers on a rocky road. One trips and falls into a ditch. The other pulls him out. "And woe to him, the one who falls and there is no second to raise him up." A man alone who falls may stay down.

This is true in marriage, in friendship, and in the church. God never meant for us to walk alone. "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). When we fall into sin, discouragement or

trouble, we need someone to lift us up. Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Who lifts you up? And whom are you lifting?

**4:11-12** *Also if two lie down, then it will be warm for them; and for one, how will it be warm? And though **someone** may overpower the one, the two will stand against him; and the threefold cord will not quickly be torn apart.*

"Also if two lie down, then it will be warm for them; and for one, how will it be warm?" In the cold desert nights of Israel, travelers would sleep close together to stay warm. A husband and wife share warmth in the same way. Friends bring warmth to each other in hard times.

"And though someone may overpower the one, the two will stand against him." A robber may attack a man traveling alone. He is far less likely to attack two. Friends protect each other.

"And the threefold cord will not quickly be torn apart." Two strands are strong. Three are stronger. A rope of three cords twisted together is very hard to break. The Preacher may simply be adding one more friend to make the point stronger. Many Christians have also seen in this verse a picture of a marriage where a husband and wife are bound together with God. The verse does not say that directly, but it is a fitting use of it. A marriage, a friendship or a church that keeps God at the center is hard to tear apart.

**4:13-14** *Better **is** a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knows **how** to be warned. For from the house of the prisoners he came out to reign, for even in his kingdom he was born poor.*

Now a short parable about power. "Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to be warned." Age and position do not guarantee wisdom. An old king who will not listen to advice is worse off than a poor young man who is wise.

"For from the house of the prisoners he came out to reign, for even in his kingdom he was born poor." The youth rose from prison to the throne. Some think of Joseph, who went from prison to second in Egypt (Genesis 41:14, 41). Others think of David, the shepherd boy who replaced Saul. The Preacher may not have one person in mind. He is describing a pattern: the humble are raised up, and the proud and foolish fall.

**4:15-16** *I saw all the living who walk about under the sun with the youth, the second, who will stand in his place. There is no end to all the people, to all before whom he was; also the latter **ones** will not rejoice in him. For this also **is** futility and a striving of wind.*

"I saw all the living who walk about under the sun with the youth, the second, who will stand in his place." The crowds flock to the new young king. Everyone loves him. "There is no end to all the people."

But it does not last. "Also the latter ones will not rejoice in him." The next generation will forget him, or turn against him, just as they turned from the old king. Popularity is a breath. The crowd that cheers today will cheer for someone else tomorrow. Jesus knew this. The same crowds that shouted "Hosanna" when He entered Jerusalem shouted "Crucify Him" a few days later.

"For this also is futility and a striving of wind." If you live for the approval of people, you are building on wind. Live for the approval of God, whose favor does not change.

## Summary

The Preacher saw the tears of the oppressed with no comforter, and in his grief he praised the dead and the unborn above the living. He saw that much hard work comes from envy, that the lazy fool ruins himself, and that a quiet handful is better than two fistfuls of striving. He saw a lonely man who worked without end, never asking for whom he toiled. Then he praised companionship: two are better than one, because they lift each other up, keep each other warm and stand together, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Finally, he told of a poor, wise youth who became king and was celebrated by the crowds, only to be forgotten by the next generation. Power and popularity, like everything under the sun, pass away.

## Study Questions

1. What did the Preacher see in verse 1, and what does he repeat twice? (4:1)

2. Why did he praise the dead and the unborn? How do other verses in the book balance that? (4:2-3; 9:4; 11:7)

3. What does the Preacher say drives much of our work? (4:4)

4. What two errors do verses 5 and 6 warn against, and what is the better way? (4:5-6)

5. What question did the lonely man never ask himself? (4:8)

6. Name the ways the Preacher says two are better than one. (4:9-12)

7. What happened to the poor, wise youth who became king? (4:13-16)

8. Where do you see oppression around you, and how could you be a comforter to someone?

9. Is your work driven more by contentment or by envy? How can you tell?

10. Who are the people who lift you up when you fall? Is there someone you need to reach out to this week?

# Ecclesiastes 5: Guard Your Steps Before God

## Scripture

**5:1-9** Guard your foot when you go to the house of God, and drawing near to listen ***is better*** than the fools' giving of a sacrifice, for they do not know ***that*** they are doing evil. Do not be hasty with your mouth, and let not your heart hasten to bring forth a word before God; for God ***is*** in the heavens and you ***are*** on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes with abundance of business, and the voice of a fool with abundance of words. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay to pay it, for there is no pleasure in fools. What you vow, pay. Better ***is it*** that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, and do not say before the messenger that it ***was*** an error. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in abundance of dreams ***are*** both futilities and many words; but fear God. If you see oppression of a poor man and robbery of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be astonished at the matter; for a high ***one*** watches above a high ***one***, and high ***ones are*** over them. And the advantage of a land in everything ***is*** this: a king for a cultivated field.

**5:10-20** ***He who*** loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, and whoever loves abundance ***will*** not ***be satisfied with*** income. This also ***is*** futility. When the good increases, those who consume it increase; and what benefit ***is there*** for its owners except the sight of his eyes? Sweet ***is*** the sleep of the laborer, whether he eats little or much; and the plenty of the rich man does not let him sleep. There is a sickening evil ***that*** I have seen under the sun: wealth kept by its owner to his harm. And that wealth perished in an evil business, and he fathered a son, and there is nothing in his hand. As he came out from the womb of his mother, naked he will return, to go as he came; and he will carry away nothing from his toil that he may take in his hand. And this also ***is*** a sickening evil: exactly as he came, so he will go; and what advantage ***is there*** to him that he toils for the wind? Also all his days he eats in darkness, and he is greatly vexed, and ***has*** his sickness and wrath. Look, what I myself have seen ***to be*** good, which ***is*** beautiful: to eat and to drink and to see good in all his toil at which he toils under the sun ***for*** the number of the days of his life which God has given him, for that ***is*** his portion. Also every man to whom God has given wealth and riches, and has given him power to eat from it and to receive his portion and to rejoice in his toil, this is a gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps ***him*** occupied with the joy of his heart.

## Preview

The Preacher has been looking at life under the sun. Now he turns to the house of God, and his tone changes. He warns us to come to worship carefully, to listen more than we talk, to keep our words few before God, and to pay what we vow. The section ends with two words that sum up his counsel: "fear God."

Then he turns to money. Whoever loves silver will never have enough. Riches bring more mouths to feed and less sleep. A man can lose everything in one bad deal, and either way he leaves the world as naked as he came. The chapter ends with a gift: the ability to eat, to enjoy one's work and

to rejoice in one's portion comes from God, and the person who receives it is kept busy with the joy of his heart.

## Study

**5:1** *Guard your foot when you go to the house of God, and drawing near to listen **is better** than the fools' giving of a sacrifice, for they do not know **that** they are doing evil.*

"Guard your foot when you go to the house of God." To guard your foot means to watch your step. The house of God in Solomon's day was the temple in Jerusalem. The Preacher is saying, be careful how you come into God's presence. Do not walk in carelessly, the way you would walk into a market.

"Drawing near to listen is better than the fools' giving of a sacrifice." The fool brings his offering and thinks he has done his duty. But God wants a heart that listens and obeys. Samuel told King Saul the same thing: "to listen is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). The sacrifice of a disobedient heart means nothing to God.

"For they do not know that they are doing evil." The fool thinks he is being religious. He does not even realize he is offending God. That is a sobering thought. It is possible to go to church every week, give money, sing songs and still not listen to God at all.

How do we guard our steps today? We come to worship prepared. We confess our sins. We come ready to hear God's Word and do it, not just to be seen or to feel good. The book of Hebrews tells us to "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear; for our God is also a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

**5:2-3** *Do not be hasty with your mouth, and let not your heart hasten to bring forth a word before God; for God **is** in the heavens and you **are** on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes with abundance of business, and the voice of a fool with abundance of words.*

"Do not be hasty with your mouth, and let not your heart hasten to bring forth a word before God." Do not rush into God's presence with a flood of words. Think before you speak to Him.

Why? "For God is in the heavens and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few." This is the heart of the passage. God is great, and we are small. He is in heaven, and we are on the earth. That does not mean God is far away or does not care. It means we should come to Him with humility and awe.

Jesus taught the same: "when praying, do not babble like the Gentiles; for they think that they will be heard in their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Then He taught us to pray, "Our Father who is in the heavens, let Your name be sanctified" (Matthew 6:9). Notice that He began with God's greatness and holiness. Prayer is not about the number of our words but the honesty of our hearts.

"For the dream comes with abundance of business, and the voice of a fool with abundance of words." Just as too much business and worry produce restless dreams, so too much talk produces

foolishness. A fool talks a lot and says little. Proverbs 10:19 says, "In a multitude of words transgression does not cease."

**5:4-5** *When you vow a vow to God, do not delay to pay it, for there is no pleasure in fools. What you vow, pay. Better **is it** that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay.*

"When you vow a vow to God, do not delay to pay it, for there is no pleasure in fools. What you vow, pay." A vow was a solemn promise made to God, often to give an offering or to do some service if God answered a prayer. Hannah vowed to give her son to the LORD, and she kept her vow (1 Samuel 1:11, 27-28). The Law said, "When you vow a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it" (Deuteronomy 23:21).

"Better is it that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay." No one had to make a vow. Vows were voluntary. But once you made one, you were bound by it. It is better to keep quiet than to make a promise to God and break it.

How does this apply to us? Most Christians today do not make vows the way Israel did. But we still make promises to God. We promise in worship songs, in prayers, at the altar, at weddings and at baptisms. Do we keep them? Jesus said, "let your word be 'Yes, yes,' 'No, no'" (Matthew 5:37). God takes our words seriously, and so should we.

**5:6-7** *Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, and do not say before the messenger that it **was** an error. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in abundance of dreams **are** both futilities and many words; but fear God.*

"Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin." Rash words can lead us into sin, and the whole person pays for it. "And do not say before the messenger that it was an error." The messenger is most likely the priest, whom Malachi calls "the messenger of the LORD of armies" (Malachi 2:7). A person who made a vow and then did not want to keep it might go to the priest and say, it was a mistake, I did not mean it. The Preacher says do not make excuses.

"Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?" Broken promises to God bring His discipline.

"For in abundance of dreams are both futilities and many words; but fear God." Here is the Preacher's conclusion to this section. Empty dreams, empty words, empty promises are all futility. The answer is simple: "fear God."

What does it mean to fear God? It is not the fear of a slave who cowers before a cruel master. It is the awe of a child who knows his Father is great and holy, and who would never want to dishonor Him. The fear of God makes us careful with our words, honest in our worship and faithful to our promises. It is the theme the Preacher will come back to at the end of the book (12:13).

**5:8-9** *If you see oppression of a poor man and robbery of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be astonished at the matter; for a high* ***one*** *watches above a high* ***one****, and high* ***ones are*** *over them. And the advantage of a land in everything* ***is*** *this: a king for a cultivated field.*

"If you see oppression of a poor man and robbery of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be astonished at the matter." The Preacher returns to injustice. Do not be shocked when you see the poor oppressed and justice twisted. That is how fallen governments often work.

"For a high one watches above a high one, and high ones are over them." This can be read two ways. Read one way, it describes layers of officials, each watching his own interest and squeezing those below him, so that corruption runs all the way up. Read another way, it reminds us that over every official there is a higher one, and over them all is God, who sees everything. Both are true. Human power is often corrupt, but God is the highest authority of all.

"And the advantage of a land in everything is this: a king for a cultivated field." The Hebrew is hard. Many understand it to mean that even with all its faults, a land is better off with a king who cares for the farms and fields, a government that keeps order so the land can be worked. Even imperfect order is better than chaos.

**5:10-12** ***He who*** *loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, and whoever loves abundance* ***will*** *not* ***be satisfied with*** *income. This also* ***is*** *futility. When the good increases, those who consume it increase; and what benefit* ***is there*** *for its owners except the sight of his eyes? Sweet* ***is*** *the sleep of the laborer, whether he eats little or much; and the plenty of the rich man does not let him sleep.*

Now the Preacher turns to money. "He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, and whoever loves abundance will not be satisfied with income." This is a law of the human heart. Money promises satisfaction, but it never delivers. A man who loves money will always want a little more. Paul wrote, "the love of money is a root of all the evils" (1 Timothy 6:10). Money is not evil. Loving it is.

"When the good increases, those who consume it increase." The more you have, the more people come to share it: servants, advisors, tax collectors, relatives. "What benefit is there for its owners except the sight of his eyes?" The rich man can look at his wealth, but he can only eat so much and live in one house at a time.

"Sweet is the sleep of the laborer, whether he eats little or much; and the plenty of the rich man does not let him sleep." The working man is tired at the end of the day, and he sleeps well. The rich man lies awake worrying about his investments, his property, his enemies. Which would you rather have?

**5:13-17** *There is a sickening evil **that** I have seen under the sun: wealth kept by its owner to his harm. And that wealth perished in an evil business, and he fathered a son, and there is nothing in his hand. As he came out from the womb of his mother, naked he will return, to go as he came; and he will carry away nothing from his toil that he may take in his hand. And this also **is** a sickening evil: exactly as he came, so he will go; and what advantage **is there** to him that he toils for the wind? Also all his days he eats in darkness, and he is greatly vexed, and **has** his sickness and wrath.*

"There is a sickening evil that I have seen under the sun: wealth kept by its owner to his harm." A man hoards his money, and it hurts him. Then "that wealth perished in an evil business." One bad investment, and it is gone. "He fathered a son, and there is nothing in his hand." He has nothing to leave his child.

"As he came out from the womb of his mother, naked he will return, to go as he came." Job said nearly the same words after he lost everything: "Naked I came out from the womb of my mother, and naked I shall return there" (Job 1:21). Paul said, "we brought nothing into the world, and it is evident that neither are we able to carry anything out" (1 Timothy 6:7). You have probably heard it said that you never see a moving truck behind a hearse.

"What advantage is there to him that he toils for the wind?" A man who spends his life piling up money is working for the wind. "Also all his days he eats in darkness, and he is greatly vexed, and has his sickness and wrath." He is anxious, angry and miserable. His money did not buy him joy.

Jesus said, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Treasure in heaven cannot be lost in a bad deal.

**5:18-20** *Look, what I myself have seen **to be** good, which **is** beautiful: to eat and to drink and to see good in all his toil at which he toils under the sun **for** the number of the days of his life which God has given him, for that **is** his portion. Also every man to whom God has given wealth and riches, and has given him power to eat from it and to receive his portion and to rejoice in his toil, this is a gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps **him** occupied with the joy of his heart.*

"Look, what I myself have seen to be good, which is beautiful: to eat and to drink and to see good in all his toil." Here again is the Preacher's light in the darkness (2:24; 3:13). Instead of hoarding, enjoy what God gives "the number of the days of his life which God has given him, for that is his portion."

"Also every man to whom God has given wealth and riches, and has given him power to eat from it and to receive his portion and to rejoice in his toil, this is a gift of God." Notice that wealth is a gift, and the power to enjoy it is a second gift. Some people have money but cannot enjoy it, as the next chapter shows. When God gives both, it is grace.

"For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart." The person who receives life as God's gift is not constantly brooding over how short and hard life is. God fills his days with joy, and the years pass with gladness instead of dread. That is the difference God makes, even under the sun.

## Summary

The Preacher calls us to come to the house of God carefully, to listen rather than offer the careless sacrifices of fools, to keep our words few because God is in heaven and we are on the earth, and to pay our vows without delay or excuse. His conclusion is simple: fear God. He then turns to injustice and to money. Those who love silver will never be satisfied, riches bring more mouths and less sleep, wealth can be lost in one bad venture, and everyone leaves this world as naked as he came. Yet the chapter ends with God's gift: to eat, drink and find good in our work, and to have both riches and the power to enjoy them, is a gift of God that fills our days with the joy of the heart.

## Study Questions

1. What does it mean to guard your foot when you go to the house of God? (5:1)

2. Why should our words before God be few? (5:2)

3. What does the Preacher say about making and keeping vows? (5:4-6)

4. What two words sum up the first section of the chapter? (5:7)

5. What does the Preacher say about the person who loves money? (5:10)

6. Why does the laborer sleep better than the rich man? (5:12)

7. What two gifts does God give in verse 19? (5:19)

8. How do you usually prepare your heart before worship or prayer? What might you change?

9. Have you made a promise to God that you have not kept? What would it look like to keep it now?

10. Where do you see the love of money pulling at your heart, and how can you practice contentment this week?

# Ecclesiastes 6: Riches Without Rest

## Scripture

**6:1-12** There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it ***is*** great upon man: a man to whom God gives wealth and riches and honor, and he is not lacking for his soul anything of all that he desires; and God does not give him power to eat from it, for a foreign man eats it. This ***is*** futility, and it ***is*** an evil sickness. If a man fathers a hundred ***children*** and lives many years, and many are the days of his years, and his soul is not satisfied with the good, and also he has no burial, I say, "Better than he ***is*** the miscarriage." For in futility it came, and in darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is covered. Also it has not seen the sun and has not known ***it***; rest ***belongs*** to this one more than to that one. And even if he lived a thousand years twice, and did not see good, does not everything go to one place? All the toil of man ***is*** for his mouth, and yet the soul is not filled. For what more ***is there*** for the wise man than for the fool? What ***is there*** for the poor man who knows ***how*** to walk before the living? Better ***is*** the sight of the eyes than the going of the soul. This also ***is*** futility and a chasing of wind. Whatever has been, already its name has been called, and it is known that he ***is*** man; and he is not able to contend with ***one*** who is mightier than he. For there are many words that increase futility; what more ***is there*** for man? For who knows what ***is*** good for man in life, ***for*** the number of the days of the life of his futility, and he makes them like the shadow? For who will tell man what will be after him under the sun?

## Preview

Chapter 5 ended with the gift of being able to enjoy what God gives. Chapter 6 shows the other side. Here is a man who has wealth, riches and honor, and lacks nothing he wants, but God does not give him the power to enjoy it. A stranger enjoys it instead. Even a man with a hundred children and a very long life, if he never finds satisfaction and is not even given a proper burial, is worse off than a stillborn child.

The second half of the chapter asks hard questions. All man's toil is for his mouth, yet his soul is never filled. Man cannot argue with the One who is mightier than he. Who knows what is good for a man in his short, shadowy life, and who can tell him what will come after him? The chapter ends with questions, and the Preacher lets them hang in the air.

## Study

**6:1-2** *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it **is** great upon man: a man to whom God gives wealth and riches and honor, and he is not lacking for his soul anything of all that he desires; and God does not give him power to eat from it, for a foreign man eats it. This **is** futility, and it **is** an evil sickness.*

"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is great upon man." The Preacher says this evil weighs heavily on people. It is common, and it is painful.

"A man to whom God gives wealth and riches and honor, and he is not lacking for his soul anything of all that he desires." This man has everything: money, possessions and a good reputation. On paper, his life is a success.

"And God does not give him power to eat from it, for a foreign man eats it." He cannot enjoy it. Something stops him. Perhaps illness, perhaps war, perhaps an early death, perhaps a restless heart that is never satisfied. In the end a stranger, someone outside his family, enjoys what he worked for.

"This is futility, and it is an evil sickness." Here is the lesson. Having things and enjoying things are two different gifts. God gives the first to many people. The second is His gift too (5:19), and we cannot buy it. Many wealthy people today are miserable. They have everything they wanted, and they are still empty. Jesus said, "even when anyone has abundance, his life is not from his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

**6:3-5** *If a man fathers a hundred **children** and lives many years, and many are the days of his years, and his soul is not satisfied with the good, and also he has no burial, I say, "Better than he **is** the miscarriage." For in futility it came, and in darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is covered. Also it has not seen the sun and has not known **it**; rest **belongs** to this one more than to that one.*

"If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years." In Israel, many children and a long life were seen as the greatest blessings. A man with a hundred children would be famous. A man who lived to a great age would be honored.

"And his soul is not satisfied with the good, and also he has no burial." Even with all that, if his heart is never content, and if he dies without the honor of a proper burial, what good was it? In the ancient world, to be left unburied was a great disgrace (Jeremiah 22:18-19).

"I say, Better than he is the miscarriage." These are strong words. A child who dies before birth never sees the sun, never knows anything, and is quickly forgotten. "For in futility it came, and in darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is covered." And yet, the Preacher says, "rest belongs to this one more than to that one." The miscarried child at least has rest. The restless, unsatisfied man never did.

These words may touch a deep wound for anyone who has lost a child before birth. The Preacher is not saying such a child does not matter. He is making a point about the restless rich man by comparing him to the one life that seems to have no story at all. Scripture tells us that God knows and forms every child in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16). I believe little children who die are safe with God. David said of his infant son, "I am going to him, and he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23).

**6:6** *And even if he lived a thousand years twice, and did not see good, does not everything go to one place?*

"And even if he lived a thousand years twice, and did not see good, does not everything go to one place?" Imagine a man who lived two thousand years, more than twice as long as Methuselah. If

he never found good in his life, what would those years be worth? In the end he goes to the same place as everyone else, the grave.

Length of life is not the same as fullness of life. A short life lived with God is far richer than a long life lived without Him. The Preacher is pushing us to ask: what makes a life good?

**6:7-9** *All the toil of man **is** for his mouth, and yet the soul is not filled. For what more **is there** for the wise man than for the fool? What **is there** for the poor man who knows **how** to walk before the living? Better **is** the sight of the eyes than the going of the soul. This also **is** futility and a chasing of wind.*

"All the toil of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not filled." We work to eat, and we eat so we can work again. But the deep hunger of the soul is never filled by food. Jesus told the woman at the well, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will certainly never thirst" (John 4:13-14). Only He can fill the soul.

"For what more is there for the wise man than for the fool?" Under the sun, both are hungry. "What is there for the poor man who knows how to walk before the living?" Even the poor man who knows how to conduct himself wisely among people has no lasting advantage. Wisdom helps, but it does not fill the empty place.

"Better is the sight of the eyes than the going of the soul." This means it is better to enjoy what is in front of you than to let your desires wander after what you do not have. Contentment with what God has given is better than always wanting more. Paul said, "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am" (Philippians 4:11). "This also is futility and a chasing of wind." Even contentment, if it is only about this world, cannot answer the deepest question.

**6:10-12** *Whatever has been, already its name has been called, and it is known that he **is** man; and he is not able to contend with **one** who is mightier than he. For there are many words that increase futility; what more **is there** for man? For who knows what **is** good for man in life, **for** the number of the days of the life of his futility, and he makes them like the shadow? For who will tell man what will be after him under the sun?*

"Whatever has been, already its name has been called." To name something, in Hebrew thinking, was to define what it is. God has already named everything. Man's place is set. "It is known that he is man." The Hebrew word for man here is adam, which sounds like the word for ground. Man is made of dust, and he is not God.

"He is not able to contend with one who is mightier than he." Man cannot argue with God and win. Isaiah asked, "Does the clay say to the one who forms it, What are you making?" (Isaiah 45:9). Paul asked, "who are you, the one answering back to God?" (Romans 9:20). We may bring our questions to God, as the Preacher does, but we cannot put God on trial.

"For there are many words that increase futility; what more is there for man?" Arguing with God only adds to the emptiness. More words do not change the facts.

Then the chapter ends with two questions. "For who knows what is good for man in life, for the number of the days of the life of his futility, and he makes them like the shadow?" Our days pass like a shadow, here and then gone. Who can tell us what is truly good? "For who will tell man what will be after him under the sun?" Who can tell us the future?

Under the sun, no one. That is the point. These questions can only be answered from above the sun. God has told us what is good. The prophet Micah wrote, "He has told you, O man, what is good," and then named it: "to do justice, and to love steadfast love, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). And God has told us what comes after: judgment (12:14), and for those who trust Him, eternal life through His Son. The Preacher leaves the questions hanging so that we will look up for the answers.

## Summary

The Preacher describes a great evil: a man to whom God gives wealth, riches and honor, but not the power to enjoy them, so that a stranger enjoys them instead. Even a man with a hundred children and a very long life, if his soul is never satisfied and he is denied burial, is worse off than a stillborn child, who at least has rest. All man's toil is for his mouth, but the soul is never filled, and the wise have no lasting advantage over the fool. It is better to be content with what is before us than to let our desires wander. Man cannot contend with God, who has named all things, and many words only add to futility. The chapter closes with two questions no one under the sun can answer: what is good for man in his short life, and what will come after him?

I have chased material things instead of the godly things that feed my soul. Getting them did not satisfy. Solomon learned the same thing with far more money than I will ever have. Only God fills what we keep trying to fill with stuff.

## Study Questions

1. What does the man in verses 1 and 2 have, and what does God not give him? (6:1-2)

2. Why does the Preacher say the stillborn child is better off than the unsatisfied man? (6:3-5)

3. What would it profit a man to live two thousand years without seeing good? (6:6)

4. What does the Preacher say about the toil of man and his soul? (6:7)

5. What does "Better is the sight of the eyes than the going of the soul" mean? (6:9)

6. Why can man not contend with God? (6:10)

7. What two questions end the chapter, and where do we find their answers? (6:12; Micah 6:8; 12:13-14)

8. Have you ever had something you wanted and found that it did not satisfy? What did you learn?

9. What is the difference between having good things and enjoying them as gifts from God?

10. Where is your heart wandering after things you do not have? How can you practice contentment with what God has given you?

# Ecclesiastes 7: Wisdom for the Good Day and the Evil Day

## Scripture

**7:1-14** A name ***is*** better than good oil, and the day of death than the day of his being born. ***It is*** better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that ***is*** the end of every man, and the living will lay ***it*** to his heart. Vexation ***is*** better than laughter, for by sadness of face a heart becomes good. The heart of wise men ***is*** in a house of mourning, and the heart of fools ***is*** in a house of joy. ***It is*** better to hear the rebuke of a wise man than for a man to hear the song of fools. For like the sound of the thorns under the pot, so ***is*** the laughter of the fool; and this also ***is*** futility. For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe destroys the heart. The end of a matter ***is*** better than its beginning; the patient in spirit ***is*** better than the proud in spirit. Do not be hasty in your spirit to be vexed, for vexation rests in the bosom of fools. Do not say, "Why was that the former days were better than these?" For not from wisdom have you asked about this. Wisdom ***is*** good with an inheritance, and a profit to those who see the sun. For in a shadow ***is*** wisdom, in a shadow ***is*** silver; and the advantage of knowledge ***is that*** wisdom keeps its owners alive. Consider the work of God, for who is able to make straight what He has made crooked? In a day of good, be in good, and in a day of evil, consider: God has made also this one alongside that one, to the end that man will not find out anything after him.

**7:15-29** Everything I have seen in the days of my futility: there is a righteous ***man*** perishing in his righteousness, and there is a wicked ***man*** prolonging ***his days*** in his evil. Do not be greatly righteous, and do not make yourself excessively wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be greatly wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die when ***it is*** not your time? ***It is*** good that you take hold of this, and also from that do not let your hand rest; for ***he who*** fears God will go out with all of them. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in the city. For there is not a righteous man on the earth who does good and does not sin. Also to all the words which they speak do not give your heart, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. For also many times your heart knows that you also have cursed others. All this I tested by wisdom; I said, "Let me be wise," and it ***was*** far from me. What has been ***is*** far off, and deep, deep; who will find it out? I myself turned, and my heart, to know and to explore and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know wickedness ***as*** stupidity, and folly ***as*** madness. And I myself find more bitter than death the woman who ***is*** snares, and nets ***are*** her heart, fetters ***are*** her hands. ***He who is*** good before God will escape from her, and a sinner will be captured by her. See, this I have found, said ***the*** Preacher, ***adding*** one to one to find an explanation, which my soul has still sought, and I have not found: one man among a thousand I have found, and a woman among all these I have not found. Only see this, I have found: that God made man upright, and they have sought many schemes.

## Preview

Chapter 6 ended by asking, "who knows what is good for man in life?" (6:12). Chapter 7 begins to answer with a string of "better" sayings, much like the book of Proverbs. A good name is better than fine oil. A house of mourning is better than a house of feasting. A wise man's rebuke is better

than a fool's song. The end of a matter is better than its beginning. These sayings are surprising, and they teach us to look at life with sober eyes.

The second half of the chapter takes up some of the hardest verses in the book. The Preacher sees righteous men perish and wicked men live long, and he warns against being "greatly righteous" and "greatly wicked." He says no one on earth is righteous without sin. He describes a woman more bitter than death and says he found one upright man in a thousand but not one woman. We will take these verses slowly and in context. The chapter ends with a truth that explains them all: God made man upright, but people have gone looking for many schemes.

## Study

**7:1** *A name **is** better than good oil, and the day of death than the day of his being born.*

"A name is better than good oil." In the ancient world, fine perfumed oil was costly and treasured. It made a person smell sweet. But a good name, a good reputation and character, is worth more. The Hebrew has a play on words: name is shem, and oil is shemen. Proverbs 22:1 says, "A name is to be chosen more than great riches." Perfume fades by evening. A good name lasts a lifetime and beyond.

"And the day of death than the day of his being born." This sounds strange. Why would the day of death be better? At birth, no one knows what kind of life a person will live. At death, the story is finished, and his name has been made. For the believer, there is more. Paul said, "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21), because death takes us home to Christ. The Preacher did not see all of that, but he saw that the end tells the truth about a life.

**7:2-4** ***It is** better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that **is** the end of every man, and the living will lay **it** to his heart. Vexation **is** better than laughter, for by sadness of face a heart becomes good. The heart of wise men **is** in a house of mourning, and the heart of fools **is** in a house of joy.*

"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living will lay it to his heart." A funeral teaches us more than a party. At a party, we forget that life is short. At a funeral, we remember. "The living will lay it to his heart." We think about our own death, and we ask how we are living.

"Vexation is better than laughter, for by sadness of face a heart becomes good." Sorrow can do what laughter cannot. It slows us down, humbles us and makes our hearts tender. Many believers will tell you they grew closer to God in seasons of grief than in seasons of ease.

"The heart of wise men is in a house of mourning, and the heart of fools is in a house of joy." The wise are not gloomy people who hate fun. They simply do not run from the hard truths of life. Fools are always looking for the next good time, so they never stop to think. Moses prayed, "So teach us to count our days, that we may bring in a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

**7:5-7** ***It is*** *better to hear the rebuke of a wise man than for a man to hear the song of fools. For like the sound of the thorns under the pot, so* ***is*** *the laughter of the fool; and this also* ***is*** *futility. For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe destroys the heart.*

"It is better to hear the rebuke of a wise man than for a man to hear the song of fools." A wise friend who tells you the truth, even when it hurts, does you more good than a crowd of flatterers. "Faithful are the wounds of one who loves" (Proverbs 27:6).

"For like the sound of the thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of the fool." Dry thorns make a loud crackling fire, but they burn out fast and give little heat. The fool's laughter is loud and empty. In Hebrew there is another play on words: thorns (sirim) under the pot (sir).

"For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe destroys the heart." Even a wise man can be corrupted. Under heavy oppression, he can lose his judgment. A bribe can twist his heart. Wisdom must be guarded.

**7:8-10** *The end of a matter* ***is*** *better than its beginning; the patient in spirit* ***is*** *better than the proud in spirit. Do not be hasty in your spirit to be vexed, for vexation rests in the bosom of fools. Do not say, "Why was* ***it*** *that the former days were better than these?" For not from wisdom have you asked about this.*

"The end of a matter is better than its beginning." It is easy to start something. It is harder to finish well. A race is won at the finish line, not the starting line. "The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit." Patience waits to see how things end. Pride rushes ahead and assumes it already knows.

"Do not be hasty in your spirit to be vexed, for vexation rests in the bosom of fools." Quick anger is a sign of foolishness. The fool carries his anger around like a pet he holds close. James says, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19).

"Do not say, Why was it that the former days were better than these? For not from wisdom have you asked about this." Every generation says the good old days were better. But that is not wisdom. The past had its own sins and troubles. Looking back with longing keeps us from living faithfully now. God is at work in our day as much as in any other.

**7:11-12** *Wisdom* ***is*** *good with an inheritance, and a profit to those who see the sun. For in a shadow* ***is*** *wisdom, in a shadow* ***is*** *silver; and the advantage of knowledge* ***is that*** *wisdom keeps its owners alive.*

"Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and a profit to those who see the sun." Wisdom and wealth together are a blessing. Wisdom helps a person use what he has well.

"For in a shadow is wisdom, in a shadow is silver." Both wisdom and money give shade and protection, like the shade of a tree in a hot land. But wisdom has an advantage: "wisdom keeps its owners alive." Money can protect you from some troubles. Wisdom protects you from many more, including the foolish choices that destroy a life.

**7:13-14** *Consider the work of God, for who is able to make straight what He has made crooked? In a day of good, be in good, and in a day of evil, consider: God has made also this one alongside that one, to the end that man will not find out anything after him.*

"Consider the work of God, for who is able to make straight what He has made crooked?" This echoes 1:15. God is sovereign over all things, the hard things too. We cannot undo what He allows or sends.

"In a day of good, be in good, and in a day of evil, consider." When times are good, enjoy them and thank God. When times are hard, stop and think. "God has made also this one alongside that one." Both kinds of days come from His hand. Job said, "Shall we also accept the good from God, and not accept the evil?" (Job 2:10). Evil here means trouble or hardship, not sin. God does not do wrong, but He rules over hard times as surely as good times.

"To the end that man will not find out anything after him." God mixes the good days and the bad so that we cannot predict the future or control our lives. That keeps us dependent on Him.

**7:15** *Everything I have seen in the days of my futility: there is a righteous **man** perishing in his righteousness, and there is a wicked **man** prolonging **his days** in his evil.*

"Everything I have seen in the days of my futility: there is a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man prolonging his days in his evil." Here is the problem of life under the sun. Good people die young. Wicked people live long. That does not seem fair, and the Preacher does not pretend it is.

The Bible does not hide this. Abel was righteous and died young. Many of the prophets were killed. Psalm 73 tells of a man who nearly lost his faith when he saw the wicked prosper, until he went into God's sanctuary and saw their end (Psalm 73:17). God's justice is real, but it is not always done quickly in this life.

**7:16-18** *Do not be greatly righteous, and do not make yourself excessively wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be greatly wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die when **it is** not your time? **It is** good that you take hold of this, and also from that do not let your hand rest; for **he who** fears God will go out with all of them.*

"Do not be greatly righteous, and do not make yourself excessively wise; why should you destroy yourself?" At first this sounds as if the Preacher is telling us not to be too good. Is that what he means? No. The rest of Scripture calls us to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). We can never be too much like God.

So what does he mean? Most Bible teachers read it as a warning against self-righteousness, a show of goodness and wisdom that is really pride. Think of the Pharisees. They tithed the smallest herbs in their gardens and looked righteous to men, but Jesus said "inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28). A person can be so strict, so proud of his own goodness and so sure he is wiser than everyone else, that he wrecks himself and everyone around him. The Preacher has just said a righteous man may perish "in his righteousness" (7:15). Do not

think that your righteousness will earn you a guaranteed long life, or that you can make God bless you by being good enough.

"Do not be greatly wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die when it is not your time?" The other side is just as dangerous. If you think that since righteousness does not always pay, you might as well sin, you will bring death on yourself sooner. Sin destroys.

"It is good that you take hold of this, and also from that do not let your hand rest; for he who fears God will go out with all of them." Hold on to both warnings. And here is the way through: the fear of God. The person who fears God avoids both the pride of self-righteousness and the ruin of wickedness. He does not trust in his own goodness, and he does not throw goodness away. He trusts God.

**7:19-20** *Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in the city. For there is not a righteous man on the earth who does good and does not sin.*

"Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in the city." Wisdom is a stronger defense than a city full of powerful officials.

"For there is not a righteous man on the earth who does good and does not sin." Here is the reason no one should be proud of his righteousness. No one is righteous all the way through. Solomon said the same in his prayer at the temple: "there is no man who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46). Paul gathered these Old Testament truths together: "There is not a righteous one, not even one" (Romans 3:10), and "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

This is why we need a Savior. If no one is righteous, then no one can be saved by his own goodness. We need a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves. Paul wanted to be "found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith of Christ, the righteousness from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:9).

**7:21-22** *Also to all the words which they speak do not give your heart, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. For also many times your heart knows that you also have cursed others.*

"Also to all the words which they speak do not give your heart, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you." Do not pay attention to every word people say about you. If you listen at every door, you will eventually hear someone say something bad about you, even your own servant.

"For also many times your heart knows that you also have cursed others." Be honest. You have said unkind things about other people too. That should make us slow to take offense. We are not as innocent as we think.

**7:23-25** *All this I tested by wisdom; I said, "Let me be wise," and it **was** far from me. What has been **is** far off, and deep, deep; who will find it out? I myself turned, and my heart, to know and to explore and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know wickedness **as** stupidity, and folly **as** madness.*

"All this I tested by wisdom; I said, Let me be wise, and it was far from me." Even the wisest man in Israel admits that true wisdom was beyond him. "What has been is far off, and deep, deep; who will find it out?" The deepest things of God and life are beyond our reach. Paul said, "O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and untraceable His ways!" (Romans 11:33).

"I myself turned, and my heart, to know and to explore and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know wickedness as stupidity, and folly as madness." He kept searching. One thing he learned is that wickedness is not clever. It is stupid. Sin is madness.

**7:26-28** *And I myself find more bitter than death the woman who **is** snares, and nets **are** her heart, fetters **are** her hands. **He who is** good before God will escape from her, and a sinner will be captured by her. See, this I have found, said **the** Preacher, **adding** one to one to find an explanation, which my soul has still sought, and I have not found: one man among a thousand I have found, and a woman among all these I have not found.*

These verses are among the most misunderstood in the book, and some have used them to look down on women. We need to read them carefully.

"I myself find more bitter than death the woman who is snares, and nets are her heart, fetters are her hands." Notice that the Preacher does not say all women are like this. He describes a particular kind of woman, one who "is snares," whose heart is a trap and whose hands hold a man prisoner. This is the seductive, immoral woman that Proverbs warns about again and again: "the lips of a strange woman drip honey," but "her end is bitter like wormwood" (Proverbs 5:3-4). Solomon knew this danger from his own life. His many foreign wives "turned aside his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4).

"He who is good before God will escape from her, and a sinner will be captured by her." The way to escape is to walk with God.

"See, this I have found, said the Preacher, adding one to one to find an explanation." He is adding things up, step by step, looking for the answer.

"Which my soul has still sought, and I have not found: one man among a thousand I have found, and a woman among all these I have not found." What does this mean? First, notice that the Preacher found upright men to be very rare too: one in a thousand. This is not praise of men. It is a sad report on the whole human race. Second, Solomon is speaking of his own search, in his own circle. It is worth noticing that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, a thousand women in all (1 Kings 11:3). In that palace of a thousand women gathered for a king's pleasure and for political alliances, it is no surprise he did not find the faithful, wise companion his heart was looking for. Many Bible teachers believe that is what lies behind his words.

The rest of Scripture makes clear that this is not God's verdict on women. Proverbs ends by praising "A wife of strength" whose price "is far beyond jewels" (Proverbs 31:10), and Boaz called Ruth "a woman of worth" (Ruth 3:11). Scripture honors Sarah, Deborah, Hannah, Ruth, Esther, Mary and many others. Song of Songs, right after this book, celebrates a bride who is beautiful and faithful. And in Christ, men and women are "co-heirs of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7).

**7:29** *Only see this, I have found: that God made man upright, and they have sought many schemes.*

"Only see this, I have found: that God made man upright, and they have sought many schemes." This verse is the key to the whole passage. The word "man" here is adam, which means mankind, male and female together (Genesis 1:27; 5:2). God made people good. The problem is not that God made women or men badly. The problem is that all of us, men and women alike, have turned away from God and gone after our own schemes.

That is the story of Genesis 3. God made Adam and Eve upright, and they chose their own way. Every one of us has followed them. The Preacher could not find a truly righteous person because there is none. That points us to the only One who was ever truly upright: Jesus Christ, "the One who did not know sin," whom God made to be sin on our behalf, "so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## Summary

The Preacher gives a series of "better" sayings: a good name is better than fine oil, the house of mourning teaches more than the house of feasting, a wise rebuke is better than a fool's song, and the end of a matter is better than its beginning. He warns against quick anger and longing for the old days, and he praises wisdom as a shade that keeps its owner alive. God sends both good days and hard days, so we must enjoy the one and consider the other. The Preacher sees the righteous perish and the wicked live long, and he warns against both self-righteousness and wickedness, pointing to the fear of God as the way through, since no one on earth is righteous without sin. He describes the seductive woman who is a trap, and says he found one upright man in a thousand and no woman among all those he searched. He ends with the truth behind it all: God made mankind upright, but all of us have gone after many schemes.

## Study Questions

1. Why is a good name better than fine oil? (7:1)

2. What can we learn in a house of mourning that we cannot learn in a house of feasting? (7:2-4)

3. Why is it not wise to ask why the former days were better? (7:10)

4. What should we do on a good day and on an evil day, and why does God send both? (7:14)

5. What do you think the Preacher means by "Do not be greatly righteous"? How does verse 18 help? (7:16-18)

6. What does verse 20 say about every person on earth, and why does that point us to Christ? (7:20; Romans 3:23)

7. How do verse 29 and the rest of Scripture help us understand verses 26-28? (7:26-29)

8. When has a time of sorrow done more good in your heart than a time of laughter?

9. Is there an area where you are tempted toward self-righteousness, trusting your own goodness?

10. Who is a wise friend who will tell you the truth? How can you be that friend to someone else?

# Ecclesiastes 8: The King, the Wicked and the Work of God

## Scripture

**8:1-8** Who ***is*** like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a matter? The wisdom of a man makes his face shine, and the strength of his face is changed. I ***say***, keep the command of a king, and ***that*** on account of the oath of God. Do not be hasty to go from his presence; do not stand in an evil matter, for all that he desires he will do. Because the word of a king ***is*** power, who then will say to him, "What are you doing?" ***He who*** keeps a commandment will know no evil thing, and a wise heart will know time and judgment. For to every matter there is a time and judgment, for the evil of man ***is*** great upon him. For he does not know what will be; for as it will be, who will tell him? There is no man who has power over the spirit to restrain the spirit, and there is no power over the day of death, and there is no discharge in the war, and wickedness will not deliver its owners.

**8:9-17** All this I have seen, and ***I*** gave my heart to every work which is done under the sun, a time when man has power over man for evil to him. And so I have seen the wicked buried, and they came in, and from a holy place they would go, and they were forgotten in the city where they had done so. This also ***is*** futility. Because the sentence ***against*** the evil deed is not done quickly, therefore the heart of the sons of man is full in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred ***times*** and prolongs ***his days*** for himself, yet I myself also know that it will be good for those who fear God, who fear before Him. And it will not be good for the wicked, and he will not prolong days like the shadow, because he does not fear before God. There is a futility which is done on the earth: that there are righteous ***men*** to whom it happens according to the deed of the wicked, and there are wicked ***men*** to whom it happens according to the deed of the righteous. I said that this also ***is*** futility. And I myself praised joy, because there is nothing good for man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to rejoice; and this will accompany him in his toil ***through*** the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which is done on the earth, for even by day and by night he does not see sleep in his eyes, then I saw all the work of God, that man is not able to find out the work which is done under the sun; because though man toils to seek, and he will not find ***it***; and even if the wise man says ***he will*** know, he will not be able to find ***it*** out.

## Preview

The Preacher opens with praise for wisdom, which makes a man's face shine. Then he gives practical advice about living under a king's authority: keep his command, do not rush out of his presence, and know that there is a right time and way for everything. But no one, not even a king, has power over the day of death.

The second half of the chapter wrestles again with injustice. The wicked are buried with honor and forgotten. Because punishment is slow, people's hearts are bold to do evil. Yet the Preacher knows "it will be good for those who fear God." He still sees the righteous treated like the wicked and the wicked like the righteous, so he praises joy, the simple gift of eating, drinking and

rejoicing in the days God gives. The chapter ends with a confession: no one, however wise, can find out all the work of God.

## Study

**8:1** *Who **is** like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a matter? The wisdom of a man makes his face shine, and the strength of his face is changed.*

"Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a matter?" The wise man is rare. He can explain things that puzzle others.

"The wisdom of a man makes his face shine, and the strength of his face is changed." Wisdom shows on a person's face. The hard, stubborn look softens. A person who walks in wisdom often has a calm, gracious face. We think of Moses, whose face shone after he had been with God (Exodus 34:29). True wisdom comes from God, and it changes us from the inside out.

**8:2-4** *I **say**, keep the command of a king, and **that** on account of the oath of God. Do not be hasty to go from his presence; do not stand in an evil matter, for all that he desires he will do. Because the word of a king **is** power, who then will say to him, "What are you doing?"*

"I say, keep the command of a king, and that on account of the oath of God." The Preacher, himself a king, advises obedience to the king. The oath of God may refer to the oath of loyalty the people swore before God when a king was crowned (2 Samuel 5:3; 2 Kings 11:17). Or it may mean that God Himself has placed kings in authority. Either way, obedience to rulers is tied to our duty to God. Paul says the same: "there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been appointed by God" (Romans 13:1).

"Do not be hasty to go from his presence; do not stand in an evil matter, for all that he desires he will do." Do not storm out of the king's presence in anger, and do not take part in a plot against him. A king has great power, and he can do what he wants.

"Because the word of a king is power, who then will say to him, What are you doing?" In the ancient world, a king's word was law. No one could question him.

Does this mean we must obey rulers in everything? No. When a ruler commands what God forbids, we must obey God. Peter and the apostles said, "It is necessary to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Daniel's friends refused to bow to the king's image (Daniel 3:18). But in ordinary matters, God's people are to be good citizens, to pray "for kings and all those who are in authority" (1 Timothy 2:2), and to show respect.

**8:5-7** ***He who** keeps a commandment will know no evil thing, and a wise heart will know time and judgment. For to every matter there is a time and judgment, for the evil of man **is** great upon him. For he does not know what will be; for as it will be, who will tell him?*

"He who keeps a commandment will know no evil thing, and a wise heart will know time and judgment." A person who obeys will generally stay out of trouble. A wise person knows the right time and the right way to act. He knows when to speak to the king and when to wait.

"For to every matter there is a time and judgment, for the evil of man is great upon him." This echoes chapter 3. There is a time for everything, and there is also a judgment coming. Man's troubles weigh heavy on him.

"For he does not know what will be; for as it will be, who will tell him?" No one knows the future. Even the wise man must act without knowing how things will turn out. James warned against saying "Today or tomorrow" we will do this or that, and told us to say instead, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that" (James 4:13, 15).

**8:8** *There is no man who has power over the spirit to restrain the spirit, and there is no power over the day of death, and there is no discharge in the war, and wickedness will not deliver its owners.*

"There is no man who has power over the spirit to restrain the spirit." The word spirit can also mean wind or breath. No one can hold back the wind, and no one can hold on to his own breath when it is time to die.

"And there is no power over the day of death." Kings have power over many things, but not over death. Every king who ever lived has died.

"And there is no discharge in the war." In Israel, some men could be released from military service (Deuteronomy 20:5-8). But from the war with death, there is no release. Everyone must fight it, and everyone under the sun loses.

"And wickedness will not deliver its owners." No scheme, no crime, no wicked trick can buy a way out of death. Psalm 49:7 says no man can pay God a ransom for his brother's life.

Only one Man has ever had power over death. Jesus said, "I was dead, and look, I am living to the ages of the ages," and "I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (Revelation 1:18). Death has no hold on Him, and through Him it will not hold those who trust Him.

**8:9-10** *All this I have seen, and **I** gave my heart to every work which is done under the sun, a time when man has power over man for evil to him. And so I have seen the wicked buried, and they came in, and from a holy place they would go, and they were forgotten in the city where they had done so. This also **is** futility.*

"All this I have seen, and I gave my heart to every work which is done under the sun, a time when man has power over man for evil to him." The Preacher has watched how power is used. Too often, the strong use it to hurt the weak.

"And so I have seen the wicked buried, and they came in, and from a holy place they would go, and they were forgotten in the city where they had done so." The Hebrew of this verse is difficult. It seems to describe wicked men who went in and out of the holy place, looking religious. When they died, they were given honorable burials. Then they were forgotten in the very city where they had done their evil. Some old copies read "praised" instead of "forgotten," which would mean they were praised in the city where they had done evil. Either way, the injustice is the same. The wicked are honored, and "this also is futility."

**8:11-13** *Because the sentence **against** the evil deed is not done quickly, therefore the heart of the sons of man is full in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred **times** and prolongs **his days** for himself, yet I myself also know that it will be good for those who fear God, who fear before Him. And it will not be good for the wicked, and he will not prolong days like the shadow, because he does not fear before God.*

"Because the sentence against the evil deed is not done quickly, therefore the heart of the sons of man is full in them to do evil." This is one of the most practical verses in the book. When justice is slow, people grow bold. They think they got away with it. A child who is never corrected learns to keep misbehaving. A society where crime goes unpunished sees more crime.

God's judgment often seems slow too. Why? Peter tells us: "The Lord is not slow concerning the promise, as some consider slowness, but is patient toward us, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God's delay is mercy. But those who mistake His patience for weakness are "treasuring up" wrath for the day of judgment (Romans 2:4-5).

"Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his days for himself, yet I myself also know that it will be good for those who fear God, who fear before Him." Here the Preacher speaks from faith. He has seen the wicked live long. But he knows something deeper: in the end it will be well for those who fear God.

"And it will not be good for the wicked, and he will not prolong days like the shadow, because he does not fear before God." The wicked man may live long, but his life is like a shadow, and it will end. The fear of God is the dividing line. Twice in two verses the Preacher speaks of those who fear before God. Under the sun, it may not look like it matters. Above the sun, it is everything.

**8:14** *There is a futility which is done on the earth: that there are righteous **men** to whom it happens according to the deed of the wicked, and there are wicked **men** to whom it happens according to the deed of the righteous. I said that this also **is** futility.*

"There is a futility which is done on the earth: that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deed of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deed of the righteous." The Preacher knows that it will be good for those who fear God. But he also sees that in this life, it often does not look that way. Good people suffer what the wicked deserve. Wicked people enjoy what the righteous deserve.

He holds both truths at once. That is honest faith. We do not have to pretend that life is always fair. We can admit that it is not, and still trust that God will set it right. "I said that this also is futility."

**8:15** *And I myself praised joy, because there is nothing good for man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to rejoice; and this will accompany him in his toil **through** the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.*

"And I myself praised joy, because there is nothing good for man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to rejoice." This is the fourth time the Preacher has said something like this (2:24;

3:12-13; 5:18). Some readers take it as a call to live for pleasure since nothing else makes sense. That is not what he means.

Look at what he has just said. Life is not fair. Justice is slow. The future is hidden. We cannot control any of it. So what should we do? We should not wear ourselves out trying to figure it all out. We should receive the simple gifts God gives each day and enjoy them. "This will accompany him in his toil through the days of his life which God has given him under the sun." Notice again who gives the days: God.

This is not the motto of the godless, who say "let us eat and let us drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). It is the thanks of a man who eats, drinks and rejoices because God has given him this day. Nehemiah told the people on a feast day, "Go, eat fat things and drink sweet things," for "the joy of the LORD is your stronghold" (Nehemiah 8:10). Joy received from God is not selfish. It is a way of trusting Him. When we cannot understand His ways, we can still thank Him for today's bread.

**8:16-17** *When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which is done on the earth, for even by day and by night he does not see sleep in his eyes, then I saw all the work of God, that man is not able to find out the work which is done under the sun; because though man toils to seek, and he will not find* ***it****; and even if the wise man says* ***he will*** *know, he will not be able to find* ***it*** *out.*

"When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which is done on the earth, for even by day and by night he does not see sleep in his eyes." The Preacher worked day and night trying to understand life. He lost sleep over it.

"Then I saw all the work of God, that man is not able to find out the work which is done under the sun." After all that effort, his conclusion is humble. No one can figure out all of God's work. "Though man toils to seek, and he will not find it; and even if the wise man says he will know, he will not be able to find it out."

This is not a failure of wisdom. It is the beginning of true wisdom. God said through Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways" (Isaiah 55:8). When God answered Job, He did not explain all His reasons. He asked, "Where were you when I founded the earth?" (Job 38:4). The wise person comes to the end of his understanding and bows before God. He does not need to know everything, because he knows the One who does.

## Summary

The Preacher praises wisdom, which makes a person's face shine, and gives counsel for living under a king: keep his command because of the oath before God, do not rush from his presence or join an evil plot, and know there is a time and judgment for every matter. Yet no one has power over the wind, the day of death or the war with death, and wickedness cannot rescue anyone. The Preacher sees the wicked buried with honor and then forgotten, and he warns that slow justice makes people bold to sin. Still, he knows it will be well for those who fear God and not for the wicked, even though in this life the righteous and the wicked often receive what the other

deserves. So he praises joy: eating, drinking and rejoicing in the days God gives. He ends by confessing that no one, however wise, can find out all the work of God.

## Study Questions

1. What does wisdom do to a person's face? (8:1)

2. What reasons does the Preacher give for obeying the king? (8:2-4)

3. When should a believer not obey a ruler? (Acts 5:29)

4. What four things does verse 8 say no one has power over or escape from? (8:8)

5. Why does slow justice make people bold to do evil? Why is God's judgment sometimes slow? (8:11; 2 Peter 3:9)

6. What does the Preacher know will happen to those who fear God and to the wicked? (8:12-13)

7. How is the Preacher's praise of joy in verse 15 different from living for pleasure? (8:15)

8. Have you ever seen the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? How did it affect your faith?

9. Where do you need to stop trying to figure out all God's work and simply trust Him?

10. What simple gift from God can you receive with joy today, even if you do not understand everything you are going through?

# Ecclesiastes 9: One Fate for All, So Live Well Today

## Scripture

**9:1-10** For all this I laid to my heart, even to make clear all this: that the righteous and the wise and their works ***are*** in the hand of God; whether love or hatred, man does not know; everything ***is*** before them. Everything ***is*** as ***it is*** for everyone: one fate ***is*** for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good and for the clean and for the unclean, and for the one who sacrifices and for the one who does not sacrifice; as the good, so the sinner; the one who swears, as the one who fears an oath. This ***is*** an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate ***is*** for everyone; and also the heart of the sons of man is full of evil, and madness ***is*** in their heart in their lives, and after it ***they go*** to the dead. For whoever is joined to all the living, there is hope; for a living dog, it ***is*** better than the dead lion. For the living know that they will die, and the dead do not know anything, and they no longer have a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Also their love, also their hatred, also their envy has already perished, and they no longer have a portion forever in all that is done under the sun. Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a good heart, for God has already accepted your works. At every time let your clothes be white, and let not oil be lacking on your head. See life with a wife whom you love all the days of the life of your futility which He has given you under the sun, all the days of your futility; for that ***is*** your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. All that your hand finds to do, do with your strength, for there is no work or explanation or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.

**9:11-18** I returned and saw under the sun that the race ***is*** not to the swift, and the war not to the mighty, and also not bread to the wise, and also not wealth to the understanding, and also not favor to the knowledgeable; for time and chance happen to all of them. For also man does not know his time: like the fish that are caught in an evil net, and like the birds that are caught in the snare, like them the sons of man are snared at an evil time, when it falls upon them suddenly. Also this I have seen ***as*** wisdom under the sun, and it ***was*** great to me: ***There was*** a small city and few men in it, and a great king came against it and surrounded it and built great siege works against it. And one found in it a poor wise man, and he delivered the city by his wisdom; and no man remembered that poor man. And I myself said, "Wisdom ***is*** better than might, and the wisdom of the poor man ***is*** despised, and his words are not heard." The words of wise men in quietness are heard more than the cry of a ruler among fools. Wisdom ***is*** better than weapons of battle, and one sinner destroys much good.

## Preview

The Preacher faces death head on. The righteous and the wise are in God's hand, but under the sun the same fate comes to everyone: the good and the sinner, the worshiper and the one who never worships. A living dog is better than a dead lion. The dead know nothing and have no more portion in what is done under the sun. These verses are often misused, and we will take care to read them the way the Preacher meant them.

Then comes one of the warmest passages in the book. Since life is short, go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart. Wear white, keep oil on your head, enjoy life with the wife

you love, and whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your strength. The chapter ends with time and chance, which happen to all, and a story of a poor wise man who saved a city and was forgotten. Wisdom is better than weapons, but one sinner can destroy much good.

## Study

**9:1** *For all this I laid to my heart, even to make clear all this: that the righteous and the wise and their works **are** in the hand of God; whether love or hatred, man does not know; everything **is** before them.*

"For all this I laid to my heart, even to make clear all this: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God." Here is a comfort before the hard truths. The righteous are not adrift. They and everything they do are in God's hand. Jesus said of His sheep, "no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28).

"Whether love or hatred, man does not know; everything is before them." We cannot tell from what happens to us whether God loves us or not. Good times are not proof of God's favor, and hard times are not proof of His anger. Everything that lies ahead is unknown to us. That is why we cannot judge God's love by our circumstances. We must judge it by His Word, and above all by the cross (Romans 5:8).

**9:2-3** *Everything **is** as **it is** for everyone: one fate **is** for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good and for the clean and for the unclean, and for the one who sacrifices and for the one who does not sacrifice; as the good, so the sinner; the one who swears, as the one who fears an oath. This **is** an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate **is** for everyone; and also the heart of the sons of man is full of evil, and madness **is** in their heart in their lives, and after it **they go** to the dead.*

"Everything is as it is for everyone: one fate is for the righteous and for the wicked." The Preacher lists pairs: the good and the clean and the unclean, the one who sacrifices and the one who does not, the good and the sinner, the one who swears oaths lightly and the one who fears to swear. All of them die.

"This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate is for everyone." Death does not check our record before it comes. The godly man and the godless man are buried in the same ground.

"And also the heart of the sons of man is full of evil, and madness is in their heart in their lives, and after it they go to the dead." Because death comes to all, many people decide nothing matters. Their hearts fill with evil and madness, and then they die. The Preacher sees the tragedy: people spend their short lives on folly, and then it is over.

**9:4-6** *For whoever is joined to all the living, there is hope; for a living dog, it* ***is*** *better than the dead lion. For the living know that they will die, and the dead do not know anything, and they no longer have a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Also their love, also their hatred, also their envy has already perished, and they no longer have a portion forever in all that is done under the sun.*

"For whoever is joined to all the living, there is hope; for a living dog, it is better than the dead lion." In Israel, dogs were not pets. They were scavengers, the lowest of animals. The lion was the king of beasts. But a live dog is better off than a dead lion. Why? Because as long as you are alive, there is hope. You can still change, still repent, still turn to God. Once you are dead, the chance is gone.

"For the living know that they will die, and the dead do not know anything, and they no longer have a reward, for their memory is forgotten." This verse has been used to teach that the dead are unconscious, that the soul sleeps until the resurrection, or that there is nothing after death. Is that what the Preacher means?

Look at the next verse: "they no longer have a portion forever in all that is done under the sun." That is the key. The Preacher is speaking about this world. The dead do not know what is happening on the earth. They have no more reward, no more wages for work, here. Their love, hatred and envy have perished, as far as this life is concerned. They are forgotten by the living. That is all true, under the sun.

But the Preacher is not giving us a full teaching on what happens to the soul after death. He is describing death as it looks from the earth. The rest of Scripture gives us the fuller picture. Jesus told of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus who both died. Lazarus was "comforted," and the rich man was "in anguish," and both were aware (Luke 16:25). The souls of martyrs in heaven cry out "with a loud voice" (Revelation 6:9-10). Paul said that to depart is "to be with Christ, which is very much better" (Philippians 1:23). That could hardly be true if the soul were asleep and knew nothing.

Paul says Christ "abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). The Preacher saw by the dim light of life under the sun. We see by the full light of the risen Christ. Both are true. The dead are cut off from this world. Those who die in Christ are with Him.

**9:7-8** *Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a good heart, for God has already accepted your works. At every time let your clothes be white, and let not oil be lacking on your head.*

Now the Preacher turns from death to life, and he speaks with joy. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a good heart." Since life is short and death is certain, enjoy the life God gives. Do not wait. Do not waste it on worry.

"For God has already accepted your works." What does this mean? The Preacher is speaking to the person who fears God and walks with Him. Such a person can eat and drink with a free conscience, knowing God is pleased with him. For us, it reminds us that in Christ we are accepted

by God, not by our works, but by His grace (Ephesians 1:6). A believer does not have to earn God's favor before he can enjoy a meal. He can sit at the table with thanks, knowing he belongs to God.

Is this a license to party? No. Bread and wine were the ordinary food and drink of Israel. The Preacher is talking about everyday meals eaten with a thankful heart. Psalm 104:15 praises God for "wine that makes glad the heart of man" and "bread that sustains the heart of man." Scripture also warns plainly against drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1; Ephesians 5:18). Joy is the goal, not excess.

"At every time let your clothes be white, and let not oil be lacking on your head." In a hot land, white clothes were cooler and were worn on festive days. Oil on the head refreshed the skin and was a sign of gladness (Psalm 23:5). The Preacher is saying, live with a festive spirit. Do not walk through life in mourning clothes. Let your life show that you know God's goodness.

**9:9** *See life with a wife whom you love all the days of the life of your futility which He has given you under the sun, all the days of your futility; for that **is** your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.*

"See life with a wife whom you love all the days of the life of your futility which He has given you under the sun." Here the Preacher names one of the best gifts God gives in this short life: a loving marriage. The word "see" means to experience, to enjoy. Enjoy life with the wife you love.

Notice "a wife whom you love," one wife. Solomon, who had a thousand women, knew the emptiness of that. He points back to God's plan from the beginning: one man and one woman, joined together (Genesis 2:24). This verse leads us right into Song of Songs, which celebrates that very gift.

"For that is your portion in life and in your toil." Your marriage is part of your share from God. It is one of the rewards He gives for the hard work of life. Husbands, do you treat your wife as a gift from God? Wives, do you see your husband that way? Life is short. Do not waste the years you have together.

For those who are single, widowed or in a hard marriage, this verse can sting. The Preacher is not saying that a person without a happy marriage has no portion. He is naming one of God's good gifts. God gives other gifts too, and He Himself is the greatest portion of all (Psalm 73:26).

**9:10** *All that your hand finds to do, do with your strength, for there is no work or explanation or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.*

"All that your hand finds to do, do with your strength." Whatever work God puts in front of you, give it your best. Do not do it halfway. Paul says, "everything, whatever you do, work from the soul, as to the Lord and not to men" (Colossians 3:23).

"For there is no work or explanation or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going." Sheol is the Hebrew word for the place of the dead, the grave. The Preacher's point is that your chance to work in this world ends when you die. You cannot come back and finish the job. Jesus

said, "I must work the works of the One who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one is able to work" (John 9:4).

Does this verse mean that the dead have no thoughts or awareness at all? No more than 9:5 does. The Preacher is speaking about the work and planning of this life, the things done "under the sun." When we die, that work is over. The New Testament shows us that believers who die are "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8), and that the dead in Christ will be raised (1 Thessalonians 4:14-16). But the work of this life, the chance to serve, to love, to share the gospel, to make things right, ends at the grave. So do it now.

**9:11-12** *I returned and saw under the sun that the race **is** not to the swift, and the war not to the mighty, and also not bread to the wise, and also not wealth to the understanding, and also not favor to the knowledgeable; for time and chance happen to all of them. For also man does not know his time: like the fish that are caught in an evil net, and like the birds that are caught in the snare, like them the sons of man are snared at an evil time, when it falls upon them suddenly.*

"I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the war not to the mighty." The fastest runner does not always win. The strongest army does not always win. "Also not bread to the wise, and also not wealth to the understanding, and also not favor to the knowledgeable." Smart people go hungry. Wise people stay poor. Skilled people go unnoticed.

"For time and chance happen to all of them." Things happen that no one can plan for. A runner trips. An army is caught in a storm. A wise man is in the wrong place at the wrong time. From under the sun, life looks like chance. Above the sun, we know that God rules over every detail (Proverbs 16:33; Proverbs 21:31).

"For also man does not know his time: like the fish that are caught in an evil net, and like the birds that are caught in the snare." Fish swim into a net without seeing it. Birds land in a trap. "The sons of man are snared at an evil time, when it falls upon them suddenly." Disaster and death often come without warning. That is why we must be ready.

**9:13-16** *Also this I have seen **as** wisdom under the sun, and it **was** great to me: **There was** a small city and few men in it, and a great king came against it and surrounded it and built great siege works against it. And one found in it a poor wise man, and he delivered the city by his wisdom; and no man remembered that poor man. And I myself said, "Wisdom **is** better than might, and the wisdom of the poor man **is** despised, and his words are not heard."*

"Also this I have seen as wisdom under the sun, and it was great to me." The Preacher tells a story. "There was a small city and few men in it, and a great king came against it and surrounded it and built great siege works against it." It looked hopeless.

"And one found in it a poor wise man, and he delivered the city by his wisdom." One poor man, with no army and no money, saved the whole city by his wise counsel. Second Samuel 20:16-22 tells of a wise woman who saved her city from Joab's army in much the same way.

"And no man remembered that poor man." After the danger passed, everyone forgot him. No statue, no reward, no thanks.

"Wisdom is better than might, and the wisdom of the poor man is despised, and his words are not heard." Wisdom is more powerful than armies. But people still judge by appearances. They listen to the rich and important and ignore the poor and wise.

Many Christians have seen in this story a picture of Jesus. He became poor for our sakes (2 Corinthians 8:9), He delivered us from an enemy far greater than any king, and He is still despised and forgotten by most of the world. The Preacher was not writing a prophecy, but the picture fits.

**9:17-18** *The words of wise men in quietness are heard more than the cry of a ruler among fools. Wisdom **is** better than weapons of battle, and one sinner destroys much good.*

"The words of wise men in quietness are heard more than the cry of a ruler among fools." Quiet wisdom carries more weight than a loud ruler shouting at fools. You do not have to be loud to be right.

"Wisdom is better than weapons of battle, and one sinner destroys much good." Here is the sad truth. Wisdom can save a city, but one foolish sinner can wreck it. It takes years to build something good and only one bad choice to tear it down. Achan's one sin brought defeat on all Israel (Joshua 7). That is a warning to each of us. Our sin is never only our own. It touches everyone around us.

## Summary

The Preacher teaches that the righteous and the wise are in God's hand, but under the sun one fate, death, comes to all, the good and the wicked alike. A living dog is better than a dead lion, because the living still have hope, while the dead know nothing of what is done under the sun and have no more portion in it. The rest of Scripture shows that this describes death as seen from the earth, and that those who die in Christ are with Him. Since life is short, the Preacher calls us to eat our bread with joy, drink our wine with a glad heart, live with a festive spirit, enjoy life with the wife we love, and do whatever our hand finds to do with all our strength, because our work ends at the grave. He sees that time and chance happen to all, and tells of a poor wise man who saved a city and was forgotten. Wisdom is better than might and weapons, but one sinner destroys much good.

## Study Questions

1. Whose hand are the righteous and the wise in? Why is that a comfort? (9:1)

2. What one fate comes to everyone, and how does that affect the hearts of many people? (9:2-3)

3. Why is a living dog better than a dead lion? (9:4)

4. How does verse 6 help us understand what the Preacher means in verse 5? What does the New Testament add? (9:5-6; Philippians 1:23)

5. What does the Preacher tell us to do in verses 7 to 9, and why? (9:7-9)

6. What does verse 10 tell us about our work, and why does it say we should not wait? (9:10; John 9:4)

7. What happened to the poor wise man who saved his city? (9:13-16)

8. How does knowing that life is short change how you want to spend this week?

9. If you are married, how can you enjoy life with your spouse as God's gift? If you are not, what gifts has God given you to enjoy?

10. What is something your hand has found to do that you have been putting off? What would it look like to do it with all your strength?

# Ecclesiastes 10: A Little Folly

## Scripture

**10:1-11** Dead flies make the oil of a perfumer stink ***and*** ferment; weightier than wisdom, than honor, ***is*** a little folly. The heart of a wise man ***is*** to his right, and the heart of a fool to his left. And also on the way, when the fool walks, his heart is lacking, and he says to everyone ***that*** he ***is*** a fool. If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness lays great sins to rest. There is an evil ***that*** I have seen under the sun, like an error that goes out from before the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and rich men sit in the low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking like slaves on the ground. ***He who*** digs a pit will fall into it, and ***he who*** breaks through a wall, a snake will bite him. ***He who*** quarries stones will be hurt by them; ***he who*** splits wood will be endangered by it. If the iron is blunt, and he has not sharpened ***its*** face, then he must increase strength; and wisdom ***has*** the advantage of giving success. If the snake bites without charming, then there is no advantage for the master of the tongue.

**10:12-20** The words of a wise man's mouth ***are*** favor, and the lips of a fool swallow him. The beginning of the words of his mouth ***is*** folly, and the end of his mouth ***is*** evil madness. And the fool multiplies words; man does not know what will be, and what will be after him, who will tell him? The toil of fools wearies him, who does not know ***how*** to go to a city. Woe to you, O land, whose king ***is*** a youth, and whose princes eat in the morning. How blessed ***are*** you, O land, whose king ***is*** a son of nobles, and whose princes eat at the ***proper*** time, for strength and not for drunkenness. Through laziness the rafter sinks, and through lowering of hands the house leaks. For laughter they make bread, and wine makes life glad, and the silver answers everything. Even in your thought do not curse a king, and in the chambers of your bed do not curse a rich man; for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and a master of wings will tell the matter.

## Preview

Chapter 9 ended with a warning: "one sinner destroys much good" (9:18). Chapter 10 shows how. It is a collection of short sayings, much like Proverbs, about wisdom and folly in everyday life. A few dead flies can spoil a whole jar of perfume, and a little folly can spoil a wise man's honor. The fool shows what he is just by walking down the road.

The Preacher gives advice for dealing with angry rulers, warns about the risks of ordinary work, and praises the wisdom of sharpening your axe before you swing it. He contrasts the wise man's gracious words with the fool's endless talk. He describes a land ruined by a childish king and drunken princes, and a house that leaks because of laziness. He ends with a warning to guard even your private thoughts, because words have a way of getting out.

## Study

**10:1** *Dead flies make the oil of a perfumer stink **and** ferment; weightier than wisdom, than honor, **is** a little folly.*

"Dead flies make the oil of a perfumer stink and ferment." Picture a jar of costly perfume. A few flies land in it and die. Soon the whole jar stinks. Something very small has ruined something very valuable.

"Weightier than wisdom, than honor, is a little folly." In the same way, one foolish act can undo years of wisdom and a good name. A pastor who has served faithfully for thirty years can lose it all in one moral failure. A businessman who built an honest reputation can destroy it with one lie. Paul says, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9). Small sins are never as small as they look.

**10:2-3** *The heart of a wise man **is** to his right, and the heart of a fool to his left. And also on the way, when the fool walks, his heart is lacking, and he says to everyone **that** he **is** a fool.*

"The heart of a wise man is to his right, and the heart of a fool to his left." In the Bible the right hand is the side of strength, skill and favor. The wise man's heart leads him the right way. The fool's heart leads him astray. This has nothing to do with being right-handed or left-handed, or with politics. It is about the direction of the heart.

"And also on the way, when the fool walks, his heart is lacking, and he says to everyone that he is a fool." The fool does not have to announce it. He shows it in how he walks, talks and acts. Everyone can see. A fool may think no one notices, but his foolishness is on display every time he steps out the door.

**10:4** *If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness lays great sins to rest.*

"If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place." If your boss or a ruler gets angry with you, do not storm off or quit in a huff. Stay calm and stay at your post.

"For calmness lays great sins to rest." A calm answer can settle a lot of trouble. "A soft answer turns away rage" (Proverbs 15:1). Many conflicts at work, at home and in the church would cool down if one person simply stayed calm. Losing your temper rarely makes things better.

**10:5-7** *There is an evil **that** I have seen under the sun, like an error that goes out from before the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and rich men sit in the low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking like slaves on the ground.*

"There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, like an error that goes out from before the ruler." Even rulers make mistakes, and some of those mistakes are very costly.

"Folly is set in many high places, and rich men sit in the low place." Foolish people are put in charge, and capable people are pushed aside. "Rich men" here likely means those of noble character and ability.

"I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking like slaves on the ground." The world is upside down. In those days, riding a horse was a mark of honor. Here the unworthy ride, and the worthy walk. We still see this when people are promoted for flattery or connections instead of wisdom and character. The Preacher does not offer a fix. He simply names it. Under the sun, things are not always as they should be.

**10:8-9** ***He who*** *digs a pit will fall into it, and* ***he who*** *breaks through a wall, a snake will bite him.* ***He who*** *quarries stones will be hurt by them;* ***he who*** *splits wood will be endangered by it.*

"He who digs a pit will fall into it." A man digs a pit to trap someone else and ends up in it himself (Proverbs 26:27). Evil schemes often come back on those who plan them. Haman built a gallows for Mordecai and was hanged on it (Esther 7:10).

"And he who breaks through a wall, a snake will bite him." In old stone walls, snakes often hid in the cracks. A man tearing down a wall might be bitten.

"He who quarries stones will be hurt by them; he who splits wood will be endangered by it." Every kind of work has its risks. The stone worker can be crushed, and the woodcutter can be hurt by his own axe (Deuteronomy 19:5). The point is not that we should never work. The point is that life is full of risks we cannot fully control, so we need wisdom and care.

**10:10-11** *If the iron is blunt, and he has not sharpened* ***its*** *face, then he must increase strength; and wisdom* ***has*** *the advantage of giving success. If the snake bites without charming, then there is no advantage for the master of the tongue.*

"If the iron is blunt, and he has not sharpened its face, then he must increase strength." A dull axe takes much more effort. You can swing harder and harder, or you can take time to sharpen the blade. "And wisdom has the advantage of giving success." Wisdom is like a sharp axe. It gets the job done with less wasted effort.

Have you ever worked hard at something and gotten nowhere? Sometimes the answer is not to work harder but to stop and think, pray and plan. Time spent sharpening is not wasted.

"If the snake bites without charming, then there is no advantage for the master of the tongue." A snake charmer who is too slow is no use. If the snake bites before he starts his charming, his skill does him no good. Wisdom must be used at the right time. Good advice given too late helps no one.

**10:12-14** *The words of a wise man's mouth **are** favor, and the lips of a fool swallow him. The beginning of the words of his mouth **is** folly, and the end of his mouth **is** evil madness. And the fool multiplies words; man does not know what will be, and what will be after him, who will tell him?*

"The words of a wise man's mouth are favor, and the lips of a fool swallow him." The wise man's words are gracious. They bring blessing and win favor. The fool's words destroy him. He talks himself into trouble.

"The beginning of the words of his mouth is folly, and the end of his mouth is evil madness." The fool starts with nonsense and ends with something worse. The longer he talks, the worse it gets.

"And the fool multiplies words; man does not know what will be, and what will be after him, who will tell him?" The fool talks on and on about things he knows nothing about, as if he could tell the future. But no one knows the future. The more he talks, the more he shows his ignorance. James warns that "the tongue is a small member and boasts great things. Look, how great a forest a small fire kindles!" (James 3:5).

**10:15** *The toil of fools wearies him, who does not know **how** to go to a city.*

"The toil of fools wearies him, who does not know how to go to a city." The fool wears himself out because he does not even know the way to town. He cannot handle the simplest task. It is like a man who works hard all day and gets nothing done because he never figured out where he was going.

**10:16-17** *Woe to you, O land, whose king **is** a youth, and whose princes eat in the morning. How blessed **are** you, O land, whose king **is** a son of nobles, and whose princes eat at the **proper** time, for strength and not for drunkenness.*

"Woe to you, O land, whose king is a youth, and whose princes eat in the morning." A nation is in trouble when its king is childish and immature, and its leaders start feasting and drinking first thing in the morning instead of doing their work. Isaiah pronounced "Woe" on those who "rise early in the morning" to pursue strong drink (Isaiah 5:11). Solomon's own son Rehoboam listened to the young men he grew up with instead of the elders, and the kingdom split (1 Kings 12:8-16).

"Blessed are you, O land, whose king is a son of nobles, and whose princes eat at the proper time, for strength and not for drunkenness." A nation is blessed when its leaders are mature and self-controlled, eating to be strong for their work, not to get drunk. The same is true of homes, churches and businesses. The character of leaders matters.

**10:18-19** *Through laziness the rafter sinks, and through lowering of hands the house leaks. For laughter they make bread, and wine makes life glad, and the silver answers everything.*

"Through laziness the rafter sinks, and through lowering of hands the house leaks." A house needs constant care. Neglect the roof, and the rafters sag and the rain comes in. This is true of a nation, a marriage, a family and a soul. Small neglect leads to big damage. Fix the little leak before the ceiling caves in.

"For laughter they make bread, and wine makes life glad, and the silver answers everything." This verse may describe the lazy, partying princes of verse 16. They eat and drink for fun, and they think money will solve every problem. Others read it as a plain observation: food and wine bring gladness, and money pays for it all. Either way, the Preacher has already shown us that money cannot answer the deepest needs of the soul (5:10). It may answer every bill, but not every question.

**10:20** *Even in your thought do not curse a king, and in the chambers of your bed do not curse a rich man; for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and a master of wings will tell the matter.*

"Even in your thought do not curse a king, and in the chambers of your bed do not curse a rich man." Be careful even with your private thoughts and words. What you say in your bedroom may not stay there.

"For a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and a master of wings will tell the matter." People still say that a little bird told them. Words have a way of getting out. Jesus said, "whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light" (Luke 12:3). The safest course is not to curse people in secret at all. If our thoughts are right, our words will be too. And even when no person hears, God does.

## Summary

The Preacher shows how a little folly can spoil much wisdom, like dead flies in perfume. The wise man's heart leads him right, while the fool shows his folly to everyone. When a ruler is angry, stay calm, because calmness quiets great offenses. Rulers make errors that put fools in high places and worthy people low. Every kind of work has risks, but wisdom, like a sharpened axe, makes the work succeed, if it is used in time. The wise man's words bring favor, but the fool's endless words destroy him. A land is cursed when its king is childish and its princes feast in the morning, and blessed when its leaders are mature and self-controlled. Laziness lets the house fall in, money may pay for pleasures but cannot answer the soul, and even our private words against those in authority can be carried abroad.

## Study Questions

1. What do dead flies do to perfume, and what does a little folly do to a wise man? (10:1)

2. How does a fool show everyone what he is? (10:3)

3. What should you do when a ruler is angry with you? (10:4)

4. What upside-down things did the Preacher see in the world? (10:5-7)

5. What does the dull axe teach us about wisdom? (10:10)

6. How are the words of a wise man different from the words of a fool? (10:12-14)

7. What makes a land blessed or cursed in its leaders? (10:16-17)

8. Is there a "little folly" in your life that could spoil something good? What would it take to deal with it now?

9. Where in your home, work or spiritual life has neglect let the roof start to leak?

10. How careful are you with what you say about others in private? What would change if you remembered that God hears every word?

# Ecclesiastes 11: Send Your Bread on the Waters

## Scripture

**11:1-10** Send your bread on the face of the waters, for in the abundance of the days you will find it. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth. If the clouds are filled ***with*** rain, they pour ***it*** out on the earth; and if a tree falls in the south or in the north, the place where the tree falls, there it will be. ***He who*** watches the wind will not sow, and ***he who*** looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know what ***is*** the way of the wind, as the bones in the womb of the pregnant ***woman***, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and toward evening do not let your hand rest; for you do not know which will succeed, this or that, or whether both of them alike ***will be*** good. And the light ***is*** sweet, and ***it is*** good for the eyes to see the sun. For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, and let him remember the days of the darkness, for they will be many. All that comes ***is*** futility. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart do you good in the days of your young manhood, and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes; and know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. And remove vexation from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for youth and the black hair ***are*** futility.

## Preview

After so many warnings about what we cannot know, the Preacher now tells us how to live with that uncertainty. Do not sit still waiting for perfect conditions. Be generous. Spread your giving and your work widely. Sow your seed in the morning and in the evening, because you do not know which will succeed. The person who watches the wind will never plant, and the one who stares at the clouds will never harvest.

Then the Preacher turns to the young. Light is sweet, and life is good. Rejoice in your youth, follow the good desires of your heart, and enjoy your days, but know that God will bring you into judgment for all of it. Put away worry and evil, because youth passes quickly. This chapter opens the door to the great poem on old age in chapter 12.

## Study

**11:1-2** *Send your bread on the face of the waters, for in the abundance of the days you will find it. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth.*

"Send your bread on the face of the waters, for in the abundance of the days you will find it." Bread here may stand for grain, a man's goods or livelihood. Some think of merchants sending grain across the sea in ships, not knowing when the profit would return. Others take it as a picture of generous giving, casting your bread out freely, even where it seems you will never see it again. Either way, the point is the same: be bold and generous with what God has given you, and trust Him for the return. "In the abundance of the days you will find it." It may take a long time, but it comes back.

Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down and shaken together and running over" (Luke 6:38). Paul said, "he who sows with blessings will also reap with blessings" (2 Corinthians 9:6). God sees what we give, even when no one else does.

"Give a portion to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth." Seven was the number of fullness, and "also to eight" means give even more than enough. Some read this as spreading your investments so one disaster does not wipe you out. Others read it as generosity to many people while you can, because hard times may come when you will no longer be able to give. Both are wise. We do not know the future, so we should be wise with our resources and generous while we have the chance.

**11:3-4** *If the clouds are filled **with** rain, they pour **it** out on the earth; and if a tree falls in the south or in the north, the place where the tree falls, there it will be. **He who** watches the wind will not sow, and **he who** looks at the clouds will not reap.*

"If the clouds are filled with rain, they pour it out on the earth; and if a tree falls in the south or in the north, the place where the tree falls, there it will be." Some things simply happen, and we cannot change them. When clouds are full, it rains. When a tree falls, it lies where it fell. We cannot control the weather or the events of life.

"He who watches the wind will not sow, and he who looks at the clouds will not reap." A farmer who waits for the perfect day will never plant. There is always some wind that might blow the seed away, or some cloud that might bring a storm. If he keeps waiting, the season passes and nothing is planted.

How many of us live this way? We wait for the perfect time to share our faith, to serve, to give, to make things right with someone, to start reading the Bible. The perfect time never comes. Wisdom does not wait for perfect conditions. It acts in faith and leaves the results with God.

**11:5** *As you do not know what **is** the way of the wind, as the bones in the womb of the pregnant **woman**, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*

"As you do not know what is the way of the wind, as the bones in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything." The Hebrew word for wind here is also the word for spirit. We cannot see where the wind goes, and we cannot see how a baby's bones are formed in the womb. God does that work in secret. David praised God, "You wove me together in the womb of my mother" (Psalm 139:13).

Jesus used the same picture of the wind when He spoke of the new birth: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes; so is everyone who has been born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). We do not understand everything God is doing, but we can trust that He is at work.

**11:6** *In the morning sow your seed, and toward evening do not let your hand rest; for you do not know which will succeed, this or that, or whether both of them alike* ***will be*** *good.*

"In the morning sow your seed, and toward evening do not let your hand rest; for you do not know which will succeed, this or that, or whether both of them alike will be good." Since we do not know which efforts God will bless, we should keep working. Sow in the morning. Sow in the evening. Do not quit early.

This is a great encouragement for anyone who serves God. You teach a Sunday school class, share the gospel with a neighbor, pray for a wayward child, give to a missionary, and you do not see results. Keep sowing. You do not know which seed will grow. Paul says, "let us not lose heart in doing the good, for in its own time we will reap, not fainting" (Galatians 6:9).

**11:7-8** *And the light* ***is*** *sweet, and* ***it is*** *good for the eyes to see the sun. For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, and let him remember the days of the darkness, for they will be many. All that comes* ***is*** *futility.*

"And the light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun." After all the hard words in this book, here is a simple joy. Life is good. Waking up to a sunrise is a gift. The Preacher wants us to enjoy it.

"For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them." Do not wait until some future day to be glad. Rejoice in every year God gives. "And let him remember the days of the darkness, for they will be many." The days of darkness may mean the hard days of old age, or the long darkness of death. Remembering them does not ruin our joy. It makes us treasure the light while we have it.

"All that comes is futility." Even the good years pass like a breath. Enjoy them, but do not try to hold on to them.

**11:9** *Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart do you good in the days of your young manhood, and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes; and know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.*

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart do you good in the days of your young manhood." The Preacher now speaks directly to young people. Youth is a gift. Enjoy it. Be glad. Let your heart be cheerful.

"And walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes." Is the Preacher telling young people to do whatever they want? Not at all. Read the rest of the verse: "and know that for all these God will bring you into judgment." Enjoy your youth, follow the good desires God has given you, chase your dreams, but always remember that you will give an account to God for how you lived. "So then each of us will give an account concerning himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

This is not a damper on joy. It is a guard for it. The joy that lasts is the joy that does not have to be ashamed before God. A young person who lives for pleasure alone will pay for it later. A young person who enjoys life with God in view will look back without regret. Paul told young Timothy,

"flee youthful desires, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace" (2 Timothy 2:22), and "Let no one despise your youth, but be a pattern for the believers" (1 Timothy 4:12).

**11:10** *And remove vexation from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for youth and the black hair **are** futility.*

"And remove vexation from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh." Two things to put away. Vexation is worry, anger and sorrow that eat at the heart. Evil from the flesh means the sins and pains that harm the body. Do not waste your youth on anxiety, and do not ruin it with sin.

"For youth and the black hair are futility." Youth does not last. The dark hair of youth turns gray soon enough. Some translate the Hebrew word as the dawn of life. Youth is here in the morning and gone by noon. That is why it must be used well. The next chapter tells us how: "remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood" (12:1).

## Summary

The Preacher teaches us how to live when we cannot know the future. Send your bread on the waters and give a portion to seven and to eight, because you do not know what disaster may come, and generosity returns in time. Some things, like rain and falling trees, are out of our control, but the one who waits for perfect conditions will never sow or reap. We do not understand the work of God any more than the path of the wind or the forming of a child in the womb, so we should keep sowing morning and evening. Light is sweet, and every year of life is to be enjoyed, while remembering that dark days will come. The Preacher calls young people to rejoice in their youth and follow the good desires of their hearts, knowing that God will bring them into judgment for all of it, and to put away worry and evil, because youth passes quickly.

## Study Questions

1. What do you think it means to send your bread on the face of the waters? (11:1)

2. Why should we give a portion to seven, and even to eight? (11:2)

3. What happens to the farmer who keeps watching the wind and clouds? (11:4)

4. What does the Preacher compare to the work of God that we cannot know? (11:5)

5. Why should we sow both morning and evening? (11:6)

6. What does the Preacher tell young people to do, and what must they always remember? (11:9)

7. What two things should we put away from our lives, and why? (11:10)

8. What are you waiting for perfect conditions to do? What step of faith could you take now?

9. Where have you been sowing without seeing results? How does this chapter encourage you?

10. If you are young, how can you enjoy your youth with God in view? If you are older, what would you tell a young person about these verses?

# Ecclesiastes 12: Remember Your Creator

## Scripture

**12:1-14** And remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood, before the days of evil come and the years arrive of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun grows dark, and the light and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the men of strength bend themselves, and the grinding women cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut, when the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one rises at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; also they are afraid of a high ***place***, and terrors ***are*** in the way; and the almond tree blossoms, and the grasshopper drags itself along, and the caper-berry fails; for man goes to the house of his eternity, and the mourners go about in the street; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is crushed, and the jar is broken at the spring, and the wheel is crushed into the well; and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. "Futility of futilities," said the Preacher, "everything ***is*** futility." And further, because ***the*** Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; and he weighed and searched out; he set in order many proverbs. ***The*** Preacher sought to find words of delight, and ***what was*** written ***in*** uprightness, words of truth. The words of wise men ***are*** like goads, and like nails firmly fixed ***are*** the masters of collections; they are given from one shepherd. And beyond these, my son, be warned: of making many books there is no end, and much study ***is*** a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter, everything has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this ***is*** all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

## Preview

The Preacher saves his most beautiful writing for last. "Remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood," he says, before the hard days of old age come. Then he paints old age in a long poem of pictures: a house whose keepers tremble, grinders who stop because they are few, windows that grow dark, doors that close, an almond tree in white blossom, and finally a silver cord snapped and a golden bowl crushed. The dust returns to the earth, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

After one last cry of "Futility of futilities," the book steps back and speaks about the Preacher himself: he was wise, he taught the people, and he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads and nails, given by one Shepherd. And then comes the end of the matter, the answer to every question the book has raised: "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment."

## Study

**12:1** *And remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood, before the days of evil come and the years arrive of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";*

"And remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood." This verse continues from 11:9-10. The Preacher has told young people to enjoy their youth with God's judgment in view. Now he tells them the most important thing of all: remember your Creator.

To remember, in the Bible, is more than to recall a fact. It means to keep someone in mind and act on it. When God "remembered" Noah (Genesis 8:1), He acted to save him. To remember your Creator means to live every day knowing that God made you, owns you and will call you to account. It means to give Him your life, not just your thoughts.

Why "your Creator"? Because the One who made you knows what you were made for. The Preacher has spent the whole book showing that nothing under the sun can satisfy. Only the Creator can, because He put eternity in our hearts (3:11).

Why "in the days of your young manhood"? Because youth is the best time to begin. It is the time when habits are formed, when the heart is soft, when there is a whole life ahead to give to God. Many people say they will turn to God later. But later is not promised, and the longer we wait, the harder our hearts grow.

"Before the days of evil come and the years arrive of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them." The "days of evil" here are not days of sin, but days of trouble: the hardships of old age, when strength fails and pleasures fade. The Preacher is not saying old age has no blessings. Scripture says "Gray hair is a crown of splendor" (Proverbs 16:31). But old age has its losses, and it is far better to come to God with a lifetime ahead than with only a few weak years left.

**12:2** *before the sun grows dark, and the light and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain;*

"Before the sun grows dark, and the light and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain." The poem on old age begins. In a young life, storms come and go, and the sun comes back out. In old age, it can feel as if the clouds keep coming back. One trouble follows another. The lights of life seem to grow dim. Some see here the dimming of the eyes or of the mind. Others see the gloom of a winter season that never quite turns to spring. Either way, it is a picture of life's light fading.

**12:3-4** *in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the men of strength bend themselves, and the grinding women cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut, when the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one rises at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low;*

Now the poem uses the picture of a great house falling into decay. Most Bible teachers understand each part of the house as a part of the aging body. The Preacher speaks in pictures, so we should hold these meanings with an open hand, but the main picture is plain.

"In the day when the keepers of the house tremble." The keepers, or guards, are likely the hands and arms, which once protected the body and now shake.

"And the men of strength bend themselves." The legs, once strong, now bend and stoop. The back bows.

"And the grinding women cease because they are few." In Israel, women ground grain by hand each day. Here the grinders are the teeth. They stop working because so few are left.

"And those who look through the windows grow dim." The eyes, which look out of the house, grow dim.

"And the doors on the street are shut, when the sound of the grinding mill is low." The doors may be the ears, which close to the sounds of the street, or the lips, closed over a toothless mouth. The sound of grinding is low because eating has become hard, or because hearing is faint.

"And one rises at the sound of the bird." Old people often sleep lightly and wake early, at the first chirp of a bird.

"And all the daughters of song are brought low." The voice grows weak and can no longer sing, or the ears can no longer enjoy music. The joy of song fades.

**12:5** *also they are afraid of a high **place**, and terrors **are** in the way; and the almond tree blossoms, and the grasshopper drags itself along, and the caper-berry fails; for man goes to the house of his eternity, and the mourners go about in the street;*

"Also they are afraid of a high place, and terrors are in the way." The elderly fear heights and falls. A walk down the street becomes dangerous. A step that was once easy now feels risky.

"And the almond tree blossoms." The almond tree blooms with white flowers in late winter. Most see this as the white hair of old age.

"And the grasshopper drags itself along." A grasshopper should leap and spring. This one drags along. It is a picture of the stiff, slow movements of old age. Even small burdens feel heavy.

"And the caper-berry fails." The caper-berry was used to stir up appetite and desire. When it fails, the appetites of life, for food and for other pleasures, fade away.

"For man goes to the house of his eternity, and the mourners go about in the street." Here the picture becomes plain. The old man goes to his eternal home, the grave, and the mourners gather for the funeral. The phrase "house of his eternity" reminds us that death is not just an ending. It is a passage to a place that lasts. For the believer, Jesus has gone to prepare a place: "In the house of My Father are many dwelling places" (John 14:2).

**12:6-7** *before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is crushed, and the jar is broken at the spring, and the wheel is crushed into the well; and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

"Before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is crushed." Picture a golden lamp hanging from a silver chain. When the chain snaps, the lamp falls and breaks, and the light goes out. That is death. Life is precious, like silver and gold, but it is fragile. It can be broken in a moment.

"And the jar is broken at the spring, and the wheel is crushed into the well." Now the picture changes to a well. The jar that carried water from the spring is shattered. The wheel that lowered the bucket breaks and falls into the well. No more water can be drawn. The flow of life stops.

"And the dust returns to the earth as it was." This is the curse of Genesis 3:19 fulfilled: "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The body goes back to the ground it came from.

"And the spirit returns to God who gave it." Here is the answer to the question the Preacher asked in 3:21. Man is not like the animals. His spirit does not simply fade away. It goes back to God, who gave it in the first place (Genesis 2:7). Every person will stand before Him. That is why the next verses speak of judgment.

For the believer, this is not a fearful thought. Stephen prayed as he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Jesus Himself said on the cross, "Father, into Your hands I will commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). The spirit of the believer goes home to God. And the body that returns to the dust will not stay there. At Christ's coming "the dead will be raised incorruptible" (1 Corinthians 15:52), and He "will transform the body of our humiliation, so that it may become conformed to the body of His glory" (Philippians 3:21).

So what should we do with this poem? If you are young, remember your Creator now, while your strength is in you. If you are older, it is not too late. The thief on the cross turned to Christ at the very end and was promised Paradise (Luke 23:43). And if you are caring for an aging parent, these verses can help you see their losses with tenderness. God says to His people, "to old age I am He, and to gray hair I, I will bear you" (Isaiah 46:4).

**12:8** *"Futility of futilities," said the Preacher, "everything **is** futility."*

"Futility of futilities," said the Preacher, "everything is futility." The book ends where it began (1:2). After all the searching, all the testing, all the wisdom, the verdict on life under the sun has not changed. Everything passes like a breath.

But now we hear it differently. We have seen that life is a gift to enjoy from God's hand. We have heard that God will judge. We have just been told that the spirit returns to God. The futility is real, but it is not the whole story. The last verses tell us what is.

**12:9-10** *And further, because **the** Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; and he weighed and searched out; he set in order many proverbs. **The** Preacher sought to find words of delight, and **what was** written **in** uprightness, words of truth.*

"And further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge." Now the book speaks about the Preacher in the third person, like an editor's note or a teacher's closing words about his own work. The Preacher did not keep his wisdom to himself. He taught it.

"And he weighed and searched out; he set in order many proverbs." He worked hard. He weighed his words, studied carefully and arranged his sayings with care. Solomon "spoke three thousand proverbs" (1 Kings 4:32).

"The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and what was written in uprightness, words of truth." He wanted his words to be pleasing, but never at the expense of truth. Good teaching is both. It is not harsh for the sake of being harsh, and it is not sweet at the cost of honesty. The Preacher's book is often hard to read, but it is true, and that is why it is in the Bible.

**12:11-12** *The words of wise men **are** like goads, and like nails firmly fixed **are** the masters of collections; they are given from one shepherd. And beyond these, my son, be warned: of making many books there is no end, and much study **is** a weariness of the flesh.*

"The words of wise men are like goads." A goad was a long, pointed stick used to prod oxen and keep them moving in the right direction. Wise words do not always feel comfortable. They poke us and push us where we need to go. The words of Ecclesiastes have prodded us all through this study.

"And like nails firmly fixed are the masters of collections." Nails hold things firmly in place. Wise sayings, gathered together, give us something solid to hang our lives on.

"They are given from one shepherd." Who is this one Shepherd? In the Old Testament, God is the Shepherd of His people: "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). The wise words of this book did not come from human cleverness alone. They came from God. This is a plain claim that these words are inspired. And it is hard to read "one shepherd" without thinking of Jesus, who said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and whom Peter calls "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4).

"And beyond these, my son, be warned: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." Endless books and endless study cannot give what God's Word gives. People can read all their lives and never find the answer. Study is good, but it can wear us out if it does not lead us to God. Here is the answer, in a few simple words.

**12:13-14** *The end of the matter, everything has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this **is** all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil.*

"The end of the matter, everything has been heard." After twelve chapters of searching, here is the conclusion. Everything has been said. Now listen.

"Fear God and keep His commandments." These two go together. To fear God is to hold Him in awe, trust Him and honor Him as God. To keep His commandments is to live out that fear in obedience. The fear of God is not terror that drives us away. It is reverence that draws us near and makes us want to please Him. The Preacher has told us to fear God before (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13). Now he makes it the last word.

"For this is all of man." The Hebrew says simply, this is the whole of man. This is what we were made for. Not pleasure, not wealth, not wisdom, not work, not fame. All of those are a breath. But a life lived in the fear of God and obedience to Him is a full life. This is what it means to be truly human.

"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil." Here is why it matters. Under the sun, it looked as if nothing we do makes any lasting difference. The wise and the fool die alike. The righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. But above the sun, every deed counts. God sees every act, even the hidden ones, and He will judge them all. Nothing is lost. Nothing is meaningless. Our lives matter because God will judge them.

This is sobering. Every hidden sin will be brought to light. "God will judge the secrets of men" (Romans 2:16). Who can stand before that judgment? None of us, on our own. As the Preacher said, "there is not a righteous man on the earth who does good and does not sin" (7:20).

That is why this ending points us to Jesus Christ. God "has set a day in which He is about to judge the inhabited earth in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed, having provided assurance to all, having raised Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). The Judge is the risen Jesus. And the same Jesus who will judge is the One who died for our sins. For those who trust Him, "There is therefore now no condemnation" (Romans 8:1). Their sins were judged at the cross.

For the believer, there is still an accounting. Paul says "it is necessary for all of us to be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10). That judgment is not about whether we are saved. It is about rewards for how we lived as His servants. Our work in the Lord is not futility. It counts forever.

So the book that began with "everything is futility" (1:2) ends with this: everything counts. Life under the sun is a breath, but life lived before God, in His fear and by His grace, is not wasted. Jesus put it this way: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). That is the whole duty of man, and the whole joy of man too.

## Summary

The Preacher calls the young to remember their Creator before the hard days of old age come. In a poem of pictures, he describes aging: a house whose keepers tremble and strong men bend, whose grinders cease and windows grow dim, whose doors are shut, where people rise at a bird's song and fear heights, where the almond tree blossoms white and desire fails, until man goes to his eternal home and the mourners gather. The silver cord snaps, the golden bowl is crushed, the dust returns to the earth, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. The book repeats its cry of "Futility of futilities," and then speaks of the Preacher, who taught the people and wrote words of

truth, wise words like goads and nails given by one Shepherd. The book's conclusion answers every question it has raised: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man, because God will bring every deed into judgment, every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

## Study Questions

1. What does the Preacher tell young people to remember, and why now? (12:1)

2. Choose two pictures from the poem on old age and explain what you think they describe. (12:3-5)

3. What do the silver cord, golden bowl, jar and wheel picture? (12:6)

4. Where does the spirit go when a person dies, and how does this answer 3:21? (12:7)

5. How did the Preacher go about his teaching, and what kind of words did he seek? (12:9-10)

6. What are the words of the wise compared to, and who gives them? (12:11)

7. What is the end of the matter, and why does it matter so much? (12:13-14)

8. If you are young, what would it look like to remember your Creator now? If you are older, how can you remember Him in this season?

9. How does knowing that God will judge every hidden thing change how you live? How does the gospel change how you face that judgment?

10. Looking back over Ecclesiastes, what has God shown you about what you are living for?

# Overview of Song of Songs

Song of Songs is the twenty-second book of the Bible. In our English Bibles it comes right after Ecclesiastes and right before Isaiah, the last of the books of wisdom and poetry. Some Bibles call it the Song of Solomon, and older writers sometimes called it Canticles, from the Latin word for songs. Its Hebrew title is its first line: "The song of the songs, which is of Solomon" (1:1). In Hebrew, saying "the song of the songs" is a way of saying the greatest song, the best of all songs. Solomon wrote "a thousand and five" songs (1 Kings 4:32), and this one was counted his finest.

Song of Songs is a love poem. It is the song of a man and a woman who love each other, long for each other, marry and delight in each other. There is no other book like it in the Bible. It does not tell a story in order the way a history book does, and it does not teach in plain sentences the way a letter does. It sings. The man and the woman speak to each other and about each other, and a group called "the daughters of Jerusalem" answers them, like a chorus. Many Bibles add headings to show who is speaking. The SLB does not, but Hebrew words show whether the speaker is a man or a woman, and I will point out who is speaking as we go.

The theme of the book is the beauty and strength of love between a husband and wife, a love that God made and calls good. From the first pages of Scripture, God made man and woman for each other and joined them as one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The Song celebrates that gift with joy. It also guards it. Three times the bride warns her friends not to awaken love until it pleases (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). And near the end she sings the key verse of the whole book:

*Song of Songs 8:6-7 (SLB)*

"Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm, for love ***is*** strong like death, jealousy ***is*** hard like Sheol; its flashes ***are*** flashes of fire, a flame of ***the*** LORD. Many waters are not able to quench the love, and rivers will not overflow it. If a man would give all the wealth of his house for the love, they would utterly despise him."

Song of Songs has 8 chapters and 117 verses. Here is its structure:

**Part One: Courtship and Longing (1:1 to 3:5)**

- Song of Songs 1: The Bride and Her King
- Song of Songs 2: My Beloved Is Mine

**Part Two: The Wedding (3:6 to 5:1)**

- Song of Songs 3: The Night Search and the Wedding Procession (the wedding begins at 3:6)
- Song of Songs 4: You Are Beautiful, My Bride

**Part Three: Love Tested and Restored (5:2 to 7:13)**

- Song of Songs 5: The Door Opened Too Late
- Song of Songs 6: Love Restored

- Song of Songs 7: The Delight of Married Love

**Part Four: Love Made Strong (chapter 8)**

- Song of Songs 8: Love Is Strong Like Death

Where this book points to Christ: The Song is first of all about a real husband and wife, and I will read it that way. But the whole Bible uses marriage as a picture of God's love for His people. God told Israel, "your Husband is your Maker" (Isaiah 54:5), and promised, "I will betroth you to Me forever" (Hosea 2:19). In the New Testament, Paul quotes God's first words about marriage, "the two will become one flesh," and then says, "This mystery is great, but I speak with reference to Christ and to the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32). Jesus called Himself the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20), and the Bible ends with "the marriage of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:7). So when we see a love that seeks, delights, forgives and will not let go, a love "strong like death" that "Many waters are not able to quench" (8:6-7), we are right to think of the greater love of Christ, who "loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The New Testament does not quote Song of Songs, so I hold this as a picture, not as the main meaning of each verse, and I will mention it where it fits without forcing it into every line.

# Background of Song of Songs

**Author:** The first verse says the song is "of Solomon" (1:1). The Hebrew can mean written by Solomon, written for him, or about him, but Jewish and Christian tradition have long held that Solomon wrote it. Solomon is named seven times in the book (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12), and the book is full of things a king in Solomon's day would know: plants and animals from all over the land, spices and perfumes, horses from Egypt, and places from Lebanon to Engedi. Solomon spoke about trees and animals and birds (1 Kings 4:33), and the Song is full of them. Many modern scholars believe the book was written or collected much later, and some see it as a set of separate love songs gathered together. I take the first verse at its word and hold that Solomon wrote it.

**When it was written:** Most likely early in Solomon's reign, about 965 B.C. Solomon ruled about 970 to 930 B.C. The book shows the kingdom whole and at peace, and it names both Jerusalem and Tirzah (6:4), a city in the north that later became a capital of the northern kingdom after the kingdom divided (1 Kings 15:33).

**The people in the Song:** There are two main voices. The woman is called "the Shulammite" (6:13). She was a young woman from the country, darkened by the sun from working in her brothers' vineyards (1:6). Her name may mean a woman from Shunem, a town in the north, or it may be a feminine form of Solomon's own name, much as we might say Mr. and Mrs. The man is the king, Solomon (1:4; 3:11), who also calls himself a shepherd in the language of love (1:7; 2:16). He calls her "my darling" and "bride," and she calls him "my beloved." The daughters of Jerusalem are the women of the city, who speak at times as a chorus. Her brothers appear at the start and at the end (1:6; 8:8-9).

**Ways the Song has been read:** For most of history, both Jews and Christians read the Song mainly as an allegory, a story in which every detail stands for something spiritual: God and Israel, or Christ and the church. That reading sometimes went too far, turning every line into a hidden code the text does not support. Today most Bible teachers read it first as what it plainly is, a real love song about a husband and wife, and then see in it a picture of God's love for His people, as the rest of Scripture does with marriage. That is how this study reads it. Some teachers also hold what is called the shepherd view. They see three main characters, not two: the young woman, a shepherd she loves back home, and King Solomon, who tries to win her for his palace. In that reading she stays faithful to her shepherd and turns down the king. This study reads the Song with two main characters, because the text calls the bridegroom the king and Solomon (1:4; 3:11) and does not clearly mark a second man, but it is held by serious teachers and is worth knowing about.

**Solomon and his many wives:** The man who wrote this song of one love later gathered "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines," and "his wives turned aside his heart" (1 Kings 11:3). How can that be? Scripture does not tell us. Most likely Solomon wrote the Song early, about one wife he truly loved, before his heart turned. The Song shows God's ideal of one faithful love, even though its writer later failed to live it. That should humble us. Knowing what is right and writing beautifully about it is not the same as living it. Solomon's later life is a warning, and his Song is still God's Word.

**Words to know:** "Beloved" (Hebrew dod) is the bride's name for the man. "Darling" (Hebrew ra'yah) is his name for her, a word for a dear companion. "Sister" (4:9-10) was a common word of love and closeness in the ancient world, not a family relation. "Bride" is used for her only in chapters 4 and 5, around the wedding. The daughters of Jerusalem are the young women of the city.

**How this study handles the Song:** The Song speaks openly about love and desire, but it does so in pictures: gardens, fountains, fruit, wine, spices, gazelles and doves. It is never crude. I will explain what those pictures mean in plain and modest words, fit for a church group, without going into more detail than the poem itself does. God made the love of a husband and wife, the physical side included, and He calls it good. The Bible says, "Marriage is to be honorable among all, and the bed undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). The Song shows us what that looks like: love that waits for its time, rejoices in marriage, stays faithful and grows stronger through trouble.

**Purpose:** Song of Songs was written to celebrate married love as a good gift of God, to show its joy and its beauty, to warn against awakening love before its time, and to show that true love is faithful, costly and strong. In a world that cheapens love and treats it as something to use and throw away, the Song shows us God's design. And by its place in Scripture, among books that speak of God's covenant love for His people, it lifts our eyes to the greatest love of all, the love of Christ for His bride, the church.

# Song of Songs 1: The Bride and Her King

## Scripture

**1:1-8** The song of the songs, which ***is*** of Solomon. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love ***is*** better than wine. For fragrance your oils ***are*** good; your name ***is*** oil poured out; therefore young women love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me ***into*** his chambers. Let us rejoice and let us be glad in you; let us make mention of your love more than wine. In uprightness they love you. I ***am*** black, and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not look at me because I ***am*** swarthy, because the sun has gazed on me. The sons of my mother were angry with me; they made me a keeper of the vineyards; my vineyard, which ***is*** mine, I have not kept. Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture ***your flock***? Where do you make ***it*** lie down at noon? For why should I be like one who is veiled beside the flocks of your companions? If you do not know for yourself, beautiful ***one*** among the women, go out for yourself in the footprints of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the dwellings of the shepherds.

**1:9-17** To my mare among the chariots of Pharaoh I have likened you, my darling. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of beads. Ornaments of gold we will make for you, with beads of the silver. While the king ***was*** at his table, my nard gave forth its fragrance. A bundle of myrrh ***is*** my beloved to me; between my breasts it lodges. A cluster of henna ***is*** my beloved to me, in the vineyards of Engedi. Look, you ***are*** beautiful, my darling; look, you ***are*** beautiful; your eyes ***are*** doves. Look, you ***are*** beautiful, my beloved, also pleasant; also our couch ***is*** lush. The beams of our houses ***are*** cedars; our rafters ***are*** cypresses.

## Preview

The Song opens with a young woman's longing. She wants her beloved to come close, and she says his love is better than wine and his name is like perfume poured out. He is the king, and he has brought her into his chambers. Then she turns to the women of Jerusalem and speaks about herself. She is dark from working in the sun, because her brothers made her keep their vineyards, and she has had no time to keep her own. She asks her beloved where she can find him at noon, and he, or the women around her, tells her to follow the tracks of the flock.

In the second half of the chapter, the two praise each other. He compares her to a fine mare among Pharaoh's chariots and promises her ornaments of gold. She says he is like a bundle of myrrh, always close to her heart, and like a cluster of henna blossoms. He tells her she is beautiful, with eyes like doves. She answers that he is beautiful too, and she pictures their home under the cedars. This is the language of two people in love, and it sets the tone for the whole Song.

## Study

**1:1** *The song of the songs, which **is** of Solomon.*

"The song of the songs, which is of Solomon." This is the title of the book. "The song of the songs" means the greatest of songs, the way "King of kings" means the greatest King. Solomon wrote over a thousand songs (1 Kings 4:32), and this was counted the best.

Why would God put a love song in the Bible? Because He made love. He created man and woman, brought them together and said it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). The first words of a man in Scripture are a love poem, when Adam saw Eve (Genesis 2:23). God is not embarrassed by the love of a husband and wife. He designed it, and here He gives us a whole book to celebrate it.

**1:2-4** *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love **is** better than wine. For fragrance your oils **are** good; your name **is** oil poured out; therefore young women love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me **into** his chambers. Let us rejoice and let us be glad in you; let us make mention of your love more than wine. In uprightness they love you.*

The Song begins with the woman speaking. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine." She is open about her longing. She wants to be close to the man she loves. Notice how she shifts from "him" to "your." She speaks about him, and then to him, as if he has suddenly come near. That is how a person in love talks.

"Your love is better than wine." Wine was the drink of joy and celebration. She says his love gives her more joy than any feast.

"For fragrance your oils are good; your name is oil poured out." In that day, people used perfumed oils, and a man of rank would smell of costly spices. But she goes further. His "name," his character and who he is, is like perfume poured out, filling the room. "Therefore young women love you." He is a man of good name, and others can see it.

"Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers." She wants to be with him, and he has welcomed her into his private rooms, the inner part of the palace. In the poem, this is a picture of being brought close, received and loved. Then a group of voices joins in: "Let us rejoice and let us be glad in you; let us make mention of your love more than wine." Many take these to be the young women of Jerusalem, who share in her joy. "In uprightness they love you." Their love for him is right and fitting. He is worthy of it.

Christians have long thought here of the believer's desire for Christ, whose name is above every name (Philippians 2:9). That is a fitting picture, but we should first see what the poem plainly says: a young woman deeply loves a good man, and she is not ashamed of it.

**1:5-6** *I **am** black, and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not look at me because I **am** swarthy, because the sun has gazed on me. The sons of my mother were angry with me; they made me a keeper of the vineyards; my vineyard, which **is** mine, I have not kept.*

"I am black, and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem." The bride turns to the women of the city. She is dark from the sun, and she knows it. In her day, a woman of the palace had fair skin from staying indoors. A country girl who worked in the fields was tanned. "Like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon." The tents of the desert tribe of Kedar were woven from black goat hair. The curtains of Solomon were rich and fine. She is saying, I am dark like those tents, and beautiful like those curtains.

"Do not look at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed on me." She feels self-conscious among the city women. Many people know that feeling, of not fitting in, of being looked at and judged. But notice that she calls herself lovely too. She does not hide or apologize for who she is.

"The sons of my mother were angry with me; they made me a keeper of the vineyards." Her brothers, likely half brothers or brothers in charge of the family since her father is never mentioned, put her to work in the family vineyards. "My vineyard, which is mine, I have not kept." She was so busy caring for their vineyards that she had no time to care for herself, her looks or her own life.

This is a woman who has worked hard and was not pampered. The king loved her for who she was, not for her looks or her rank. God also looks past outward appearance. "Man sees according to the eyes, and the LORD sees according to the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

**1:7-8** *Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture **your flock**? Where do you make **it** lie down at noon? For why should I be like one who is veiled beside the flocks of your companions? If you do not know for yourself, beautiful **one** among the women, go out for yourself in the footprints of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the dwellings of the shepherds.*

"Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture your flock? Where do you make it lie down at noon?" She speaks to him again. She uses the language of shepherds. In the heat of the day, shepherds rested their flocks in the shade. She wants to know where he will be, so she can find him.

"For why should I be like one who is veiled beside the flocks of your companions?" She does not want to wander among other shepherds looking for him, like a woman with her face covered who might be mistaken for one of loose character. She wants to go straight to him, with honor.

"If you do not know for yourself, beautiful one among the women, go out for yourself in the footprints of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the dwellings of the shepherds." The answer comes, either from him or from the women. Follow the tracks of the sheep, and you will find the shepherds' tents. She is called "beautiful one among the women." Whatever she thinks of herself, others see her beauty.

Why does a king speak of himself as a shepherd? In the ancient world, kings were often called shepherds of their people. David was a shepherd before he was king. In love poetry, the king can play the part of a shepherd and she a shepherdess. Jesus, our King, calls Himself "the good shepherd" who knows His own (John 10:14).

**1:9-11** *To my mare among the chariots of Pharaoh I have likened you, my darling. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of beads. Ornaments of gold we will make for you, with beads of the silver.*

Now the man speaks. "To my mare among the chariots of Pharaoh I have likened you, my darling." This may sound strange to us, but it was high praise. Solomon brought horses from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28), and the finest were kept for the king's chariots. A beautiful mare, decked out in ornaments, stood out among them and drew every eye. He is saying, you are stunning, and you stand out from everyone else.

"My darling" is his favorite name for her. It means a dear companion, a close friend. He loves her as a wife and treasures her as a friend.

"Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of beads." Like the decorated mare, she wears jewelry, and it makes her even more lovely.

"Ornaments of gold we will make for you, with beads of the silver." He promises her even finer jewelry. He wants to honor her and give her the best. A husband who loves his wife delights to give to her.

**1:12-14** *While the king **was** at his table, my nard gave forth its fragrance. A bundle of myrrh **is** my beloved to me; between my breasts it lodges. A cluster of henna **is** my beloved to me, in the vineyards of Engedi.*

The bride speaks. "While the king was at his table, my nard gave forth its fragrance." Nard was a costly perfume from far away, used for special occasions. Mary of Bethany poured a jar of pure nard on Jesus' feet (John 12:3). Here, while the king is near, her perfume fills the air. Her love is like that fragrance, reaching out to him.

"A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me; between my breasts it lodges." Women in that day sometimes wore a little pouch of myrrh, a sweet-smelling resin, on a cord around the neck, so the fragrance stayed with them all day and night. She is saying that her beloved is always near her heart. His presence is sweet, and he stays with her.

"A cluster of henna is my beloved to me, in the vineyards of Engedi." Henna plants have fragrant clusters of small white flowers. Engedi was an oasis by the Dead Sea, a green, refreshing place with springs and vineyards in the middle of the desert (1 Samuel 24:1). He is to her like fresh blossoms in a dry land.

**1:15-17** *Look, you **are** beautiful, my darling; look, you **are** beautiful; your eyes **are** doves. Look, you **are** beautiful, my beloved, also pleasant; also our couch **is** lush. The beams of our houses **are** cedars; our rafters **are** cypresses.*

He speaks: "Look, you are beautiful, my darling; look, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves." He says it twice, because he means it. Doves are gentle, pure and soft. Her eyes are calm and lovely, and they tell him of her gentle heart. Most of us say "I love you" less often than we should. This man says it again and again.

She answers: "Look, you are beautiful, my beloved, also pleasant." She returns his praise. Love in the Song goes both ways. Each one delights in the other and says so.

"Also our couch is lush. The beams of our houses are cedars; our rafters are cypresses." She pictures their home together. Some see an outdoor scene, a green meadow under tall trees. Others see the cedar-paneled rooms of the palace. Either way, she is dreaming of a shared life, a place that is theirs. Love looks forward to a home.

What does this chapter teach us? That love between a man and a woman is good. That it should be expressed in words, often and freely. That a husband should honor his wife, and a wife should delight in her husband. And that true love looks past outward appearance to the person inside. Married couples would do well to speak to each other the way these two do.

## Summary

The Song of Songs, the greatest of Solomon's songs, opens with a young woman longing for the kisses and the love of her beloved, which she says is better than wine. He is the king, and he has brought her into his chambers, and the young women of Jerusalem rejoice with her. She tells the daughters of Jerusalem that she is dark from working in her brothers' vineyards, yet lovely, and she asks her beloved where she may find him at noon. He praises her as a fine mare among Pharaoh's chariots and promises her ornaments of gold. She says he is like a bundle of myrrh close to her heart and like henna blossoms at Engedi. They praise each other's beauty, and she pictures their home beneath the cedars and cypresses.

## Study Questions

1. What does the title "the song of the songs" mean? Why do you think God included a love song in the Bible? (1:1; Genesis 1:31)

2. What does the bride say her beloved's love is better than, and what is his name like? (1:2-3)

3. What does the bride say about her appearance, and why is she dark? (1:5-6)

4. Where does she want to find her beloved, and what is she told? (1:7-8)

5. What does he compare her to, and what does he promise her? (1:9-11)

6. What does she compare her beloved to? What do those pictures mean? (1:13-14)

7. How do the man and the woman speak to each other in verses 15-17? (1:15-17)

8. The bride felt self-conscious among others (1:6). How does it help to know that God looks at the heart?

9. If you are married, when did you last tell your spouse what you love about him or her? If you are not, how can you encourage the married people around you?

10. How does this chapter change the way you think about God's view of love and marriage?

# Song of Songs 2: My Beloved Is Mine

## Scripture

**2:1-17** I ***am*** the crocus of the Sharon, the lily of the valleys. Like a lily among the thorns, so ***is*** my darling among the daughters. Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so ***is*** my beloved among the sons. In his shade I delighted and sat down, and his fruit ***was*** sweet to my palate. He has brought me into the house of the wine, and his banner over me ***is*** love. Sustain me with the raisin cakes; refresh me with the apples, for I ***am*** sick with love. His left ***hand is*** under my head, and his right ***hand*** embraces me. I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases. The sound of my beloved! Look, this ***one is*** coming, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags. Look, this ***one is*** standing behind our wall, gazing from the windows, peering from the lattices. My beloved answered and said to me, "Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful ***one***, and come for yourself. For look, the winter has passed; the rain has passed away; it has gone for itself. The blossoms have appeared in the land; the time of the pruning has arrived, and the sound of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has ripened its early figs, and the vines ***in*** blossom have given forth fragrance. Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful ***one***, and come for yourself. My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding place of the steep way, show me your form; make me hear your voice, for your voice ***is*** sweet, and your form ***is*** lovely." Seize for us foxes, little foxes ruining vineyards, and our vineyards ***are in*** blossom. My beloved ***is*** mine, and I ***am*** his, who pastures among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn; be for yourself, my beloved, like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of Bether.

## Preview

The bride calls herself a simple wildflower, a crocus of the Sharon plain, and her beloved answers that she is a lily among thorns compared to other women. She says he is like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, giving her shade and sweet fruit. He has brought her to the banqueting house, and his banner over her is love. Then comes the first of three refrains in the Song, a solemn charge "that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases."

The second half of the chapter is a song of spring. Her beloved comes leaping over the hills like a gazelle and calls to her through the window: winter is past, the flowers have appeared, the time of singing has come; arise and come away. He asks to see her face and hear her voice. She asks for the little foxes that spoil the vineyards to be caught, and then she says the words at the heart of the book: "My beloved is mine, and I am his."

## Study

**2:1-2** *I **am** the crocus of the Sharon, the lily of the valleys. Like a lily among the thorns, so **is** my darling among the daughters.*

"I am the crocus of the Sharon, the lily of the valleys." The bride speaks. The Sharon was a broad plain along the coast of Israel, covered with wildflowers in the spring. She is not boasting. She is saying, I am just one of many common flowers in the field, a simple country girl.

Many hymns call Jesus the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley. The words here are spoken by the bride about herself, not by the man, so the verse does not directly describe Christ. Still, Christians have long loved to use these words of Him, as a picture of His beauty. That is a devotional use of the words, and we should know the difference.

"Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the daughters." He answers her humble words. You may call yourself an ordinary flower, but to me you are a lily among thorns. Next to you, the other women seem like thorns. A good husband sees his wife this way.

**2:3** *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so **is** my beloved among the sons. In his shade I delighted and sat down, and his fruit **was** sweet to my palate.*

"Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons." She returns the praise. In a forest of ordinary trees, an apple tree stands out because it gives fruit and shade. Her beloved stands out from all other young men in the same way.

"In his shade I delighted and sat down, and his fruit was sweet to my palate." In a hot land, shade is rest and protection. She rests in his love and finds it sweet. A wife should be able to find rest, safety and joy in her husband's love. It is a beautiful picture, too, of the rest Jesus offers: "Come to Me, all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

**2:4-6** *He has brought me into the house of the wine, and his banner over me **is** love. Sustain me with the raisin cakes; refresh me with the apples, for I **am** sick with love. His left **hand is** under my head, and his right **hand** embraces me.*

"He has brought me into the house of the wine, and his banner over me is love." The house of wine is the banqueting hall, the place of feasting and joy. A banner was a flag raised over an army or a camp to show who it belonged to. His banner over her is love. Everyone can see that she belongs to him, and that he loves her. Moses named an altar "The LORD Is My Banner" (Exodus 17:15). When a man's love is displayed openly over his wife, she is secure.

"Sustain me with the raisin cakes; refresh me with the apples, for I am sick with love." Her love is so strong it makes her weak. She asks for food to strengthen her. Anyone who has been deeply in love knows that feeling.

"His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me." She pictures herself held in his arms. It is a picture of tender closeness and safety. The same words come again in 8:3. The poem

does not describe more than this, and neither will we. What it shows is that the bride longs to be held by the one she loves.

**2:7** *I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases.*

"I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases." This is the first of three times the bride says this (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). It is one of the most important verses in the book.

To adjure means to put someone under a solemn oath. She swears them "by gazelles or by the does of the field," graceful animals that stand for beauty and love in the Song. Some hear in the Hebrew a sound like the names of God, but whether or not that is meant, the oath is serious.

What is she asking? "That you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases." Do not stir up love, do not wake it up, before the right time. Right after speaking of her desire to be held, she stops and gives a warning. Love and desire are powerful. They are good gifts from God, but they can be awakened too soon. Once stirred up, they are hard to put back to sleep.

"Until it pleases" means until the right time, until love is ready and it is right. In the Song, that time is marriage. The wedding comes in chapters 3 and 4, and only then does the full union of the couple come (4:16-5:1). The bride, who has strong feelings, is telling the younger women to wait.

This is a word every young person needs to hear. Our world says to follow your feelings wherever they lead. God says desire is good, and it has a place. Do not wake it up before its time. Guard your heart. Do not put yourself in situations that stir up what you cannot rightly fulfill. Paul says, "this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). He also says, "make no provision for the flesh, for its desires" (Romans 13:14).

This verse is not only for the young. Married people should guard their hearts against stirring up desire for anyone but their spouse. Single adults, widows and widowers can take comfort that waiting is not wasted. And anyone who has awakened love before its time can find forgiveness and a fresh start in Christ. David prayed after his sin, "Create for me a pure heart, God" (Psalm 51:10), and God answered.

**2:8-9** *The sound of my beloved! Look, this **one is** coming, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags. Look, this **one is** standing behind our wall, gazing from the windows, peering from the lattices.*

"The sound of my beloved! Look, this one is coming, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills." The scene changes. She hears him coming before she sees him. He is eager to see her, bounding over every obstacle in his way.

"My beloved is like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags." Gazelles are swift and graceful. He is strong and quick, and he does not let anything stop him from reaching her.

"Look, this one is standing behind our wall, gazing from the windows, peering from the lattices." He has arrived at her family's house. He stands outside and looks in through the window lattice, the wooden screen that covered windows. He is close, but respectful. He waits outside and calls to her.

**2:10-13** *My beloved answered and said to me, "Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful **one**, and come for yourself. For look, the winter has passed; the rain has passed away; it has gone for itself. The blossoms have appeared in the land; the time of the pruning has arrived, and the sound of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has ripened its early figs, and the vines **in** blossom have given forth fragrance. Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful **one**, and come for yourself.*

"My beloved answered and said to me, Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful one, and come for yourself." He invites her to come out and walk with him.

"For look, the winter has passed; the rain has passed away; it has gone for itself." In Israel, winter is the rainy season, cold and gray. When spring comes, the land bursts to life. "The blossoms have appeared in the land; the time of the pruning has arrived, and the sound of the turtledove has been heard in our land." The flowers are out. The vines are being pruned. Turtledoves, which come back in spring, are singing. The Hebrew word for pruning can also mean singing, so some translate it as the time of singing.

"The fig tree has ripened its early figs, and the vines in blossom have given forth fragrance." Everything is fresh and new. It is the season for love.

"Arise for yourself, my darling, my beautiful one, and come for yourself." He repeats his invitation. Come, let us enjoy this season together.

This is one of the loveliest passages in the Bible. Love has its springtime, when everything feels new. Married couples should not lose that. They should make time to walk together, enjoy God's world together and delight in each other, even after many years. Many Christians have also heard in these verses the call of Christ to His people: the winter is past, come away with Me. That is a sweet picture, and it fits the Bible's teaching, but the plain meaning is a young man calling his love to come out into the spring.

**2:14** *My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding place of the steep way, show me your form; make me hear your voice, for your voice **is** sweet, and your form **is** lovely."*

"My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding place of the steep way." Doves often nest in cracks in high cliffs, hard to reach. He calls her his dove, hidden away. She is shy, or perhaps she is still inside, out of sight.

"Show me your form; make me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your form is lovely." He wants to see her face and hear her voice. He is not satisfied to admire her from a distance. He wants to know her. This is true love: not just enjoying someone's looks, but wanting to hear her heart.

Husbands, do you want to hear your wife's voice? Do you ask her what she thinks and feels, and listen? It is a simple thing, but it says a great deal.

**2:15** *Seize for us foxes, little foxes ruining vineyards, and our vineyards **are in** blossom.*

"Seize for us foxes, little foxes ruining vineyards, and our vineyards are in blossom." Foxes, and the small jackals often called by the same name, dug around the roots of vines and ate the tender shoots. A vineyard in blossom was easily damaged. Someone had to catch them before they ruined the harvest.

In the Song, the vineyard often pictures love itself, or the bride (1:6; 8:12). The little foxes are the small things that can damage a growing love: careless words, selfishness, neglect, jealousy, unresolved anger, distractions. Big problems in a marriage often start as little foxes no one bothered to catch. Deal with the small things early, while love is in blossom, before they ruin the harvest.

**2:16-17** *My beloved **is** mine, and I **am** his, who pastures among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn; be for yourself, my beloved, like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of Bether.*

"My beloved is mine, and I am his, who pastures among the lilies." This is the heart of the Song. It is a statement of belonging. He belongs to her, and she belongs to him. The love is mutual and exclusive. No one else has a share in it. Paul teaches the same thing about marriage: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Corinthians 7:4). In marriage, each gives himself or herself to the other.

"Who pastures among the lilies." Again he is pictured as a shepherd, feeding his flock among the flowers. Lilies in the Song are linked with her beauty (2:2), so this may be a gentle way of saying he delights in her.

"Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn; be for yourself, my beloved, like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of Bether." "Until the day breathes" likely means until the cool breeze of evening, or until dawn, when the shadows disappear. She asks him to come back to her swiftly, like a gazelle. The mountains of Bether are not known as a place on any map. The name may mean mountains of separation, or cleft mountains. She may be asking him to come quickly over the mountains that separate them.

We can hear in "My beloved is mine, and I am his" an echo of God's covenant with His people: "I will be your God, and you, you will be My people" (Leviticus 26:12). Believers can say of Christ, He is mine and I am His. Jesus said, "Even as the Father loved Me, I also loved you; remain in My love" (John 15:9).

## Summary

The bride calls herself a simple crocus of the Sharon, and her beloved calls her a lily among thorns. She says he is like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, whose shade gives her rest

and whose fruit is sweet. He has brought her to the banqueting house, and his banner over her is love. She is weak with love and longs to be held, and then she warns the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up or awaken love until it pleases, until the right time. Her beloved comes leaping over the hills like a gazelle and calls her to come out, because winter is past and spring has come. He asks to see her face and hear her voice. She asks for the little foxes that ruin the blossoming vineyards to be caught. She says, "My beloved is mine, and I am his," and asks him to return to her swiftly.

## Study Questions

1. How does the bride describe herself, and how does her beloved answer? (2:1-2)

2. What does she compare him to, and what does she find in his shade? (2:3)

3. What does it mean that his banner over her is love? (2:4)

4. What does the bride ask of the daughters of Jerusalem, and why do you think she says it right after verses 5 and 6? (2:5-7)

5. What signs of spring does the man describe, and what does he ask her to do? (2:10-13)

6. What does he want from his dove in the clefts of the rock? (2:14)

7. What do the little foxes do, and what might they picture in a relationship? (2:15)

8. What does "My beloved is mine, and I am his" tell us about married love? (2:16; 1 Corinthians 7:4)

9. How can you guard your heart, or help young people you know guard theirs, so that love is not awakened before its time?

10. What little foxes might be troubling your marriage, your friendships or your walk with God? What could you do about them this week?

# Song of Songs 3: The Night Search and the Wedding Procession

## Scripture

**3:1-11** On my bed in the nights I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, and I did not find him. Let me arise now and go around in the city, in the streets and in the open squares; let me seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, and I did not find him. The watchmen who go around in the city found me. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed from them when I found him whom my soul loves. I grasped him, and I would not let him go until I had brought him into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases. Who ***is*** this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed ***with*** myrrh and frankincense, from every scented powder of a merchant? Look, his bed, which ***belongs*** to Solomon! Sixty mighty men ***are*** around it, from the mighty men of Israel. All of them gripping a sword, trained ***in*** war, each man ***has*** his sword on his thigh because of dread in the nights. A litter King Solomon made for himself from the wood of Lebanon. Its posts he made ***of*** silver, its back ***of*** gold, its seat ***of*** purple; its interior ***was*** inlaid ***with*** love from the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out and look, daughters of Zion, on King Solomon, on the crown ***with*** which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart.

## Preview

The chapter opens at night. The bride lies on her bed, longing for the one her soul loves, and he is not there. She gets up and searches the streets and squares of the city. The watchmen find her, and just after she passes them, she finds him. She holds him and will not let him go until she has brought him to her mother's house. Then, for the second time, she charges the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until it pleases.

The second half of the chapter is a grand scene. A procession comes up from the wilderness, like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense. It is King Solomon's royal litter, carried in state and guarded by sixty mighty men with swords. The litter is made of cedar, silver, gold and purple. The daughters of Zion are called to come out and see the king wearing the crown his mother placed on him on his wedding day, the day of the gladness of his heart.

## Study

**3:1-2** *On my bed in the nights I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, and I did not find him. Let me arise now and go around in the city, in the streets and in the open squares; let me seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, and I did not find him.*

"On my bed in the nights I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, and I did not find him." The bride speaks. She is alone at night, and she misses him. "Him whom my soul loves" is how she

speaks of him four times in these verses. Her love is not shallow. It comes from the depth of who she is.

Is this a real event or a dream? Many Bible teachers believe it is a dream, or the kind of anxious longing that comes at night, because a young woman of that day would not normally wander the city alone after dark. A similar scene in 5:2 begins, "I was sleeping, and my heart was awake." Either way, the feeling is real. She is afraid of losing him, and she cannot rest until she finds him.

"Let me arise now and go around in the city, in the streets and in the open squares; let me seek him whom my soul loves." She does not just lie there. She gets up and looks for him everywhere. "I sought him, and I did not find him." Twice now she has said it. The search is painful.

Have you ever longed for someone and could not reach them? Love that is real feels the absence of the one it loves. Psalm 63:1 speaks of a soul that thirsts for God in a dry and weary land. The bride's longing for her beloved is a picture of how a believer can long for God.

**3:3-4** *The watchmen who go around in the city found me. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed from them when I found him whom my soul loves. I grasped him, and I would not let him go until I had brought him into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.*

"The watchmen who go around in the city found me." The city had watchmen who patrolled at night to keep order. She asks them, "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" She is so focused on him that she does not even explain who she means. She assumes everyone knows.

"Scarcely had I passed from them when I found him whom my soul loves." Right after she leaves the watchmen, there he is. Her search is over.

"I grasped him, and I would not let him go until I had brought him into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me." She holds on to him and brings him home to her mother's house. In that day, this was a way of bringing him into her family, showing her family that this was the man she would marry. It looks ahead to the wedding that comes in the next verses. The poem does not say anything improper happened. She simply wants him with her, where her family is, and not to lose him again.

**3:5** *I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases.*

"I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by the does of the field, that you not rouse and that you not arouse the love until it pleases." This is the second time she gives this charge, word for word as in 2:7. Just when her longing is strongest, when she has found him and holds him tight, she again warns the young women: wait. Do not stir up love before its time.

Notice where this second refrain falls. It comes right before the wedding procession. The timing is the lesson. The desire is right, and the person is right, but the time has not yet come. The wedding comes first. Then, in chapter 4, the couple comes together as husband and wife. The Song shows

us the right order: longing, waiting, the public covenant of marriage, and then the full joy of union.

Why does God care so much about the timing? Because He made love to be the seal of a lifelong covenant. Jesus said that "the two will be into one flesh," and "what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Mark 10:8-9). Intimacy outside of marriage tries to take the gift without the covenant, and it always leaves wounds. The bride knows the power of her feelings, and she knows they must wait for the right time.

**3:6** *Who **is** this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed **with** myrrh and frankincense, from every scented powder of a merchant?*

"Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, from every scented powder of a merchant?" The scene changes. A crowd looks out toward the wilderness and sees a procession coming. Clouds of dust or of burning incense rise like columns of smoke. The air is filled with expensive perfumes. It is a royal wedding procession.

Some think the question "Who is this?" refers to the bride being brought to Jerusalem from her country home. Others think it is the king's litter, described in the next verse. Most likely the whole procession is meant: the king coming in state, with his bride, to the wedding.

**3:7-8** *Look, his bed, which **belongs** to Solomon! Sixty mighty men **are** around it, from the mighty men of Israel. All of them gripping a sword, trained **in** war, each man **has** his sword on his thigh because of dread in the nights.*

"Look, his bed, which belongs to Solomon! Sixty mighty men are around it, from the mighty men of Israel." The word "bed" here means a litter or couch, a covered seat carried on poles by servants. It is surrounded by sixty of the best warriors in Israel. David had a famous group of mighty men (2 Samuel 23:8-39). Solomon's wedding was guarded by sixty of his own.

"All of them gripping a sword, trained in war, each man has his sword on his thigh because of dread in the nights." These soldiers are not just for show. Travel through the wilderness could be dangerous, especially at night. The king protects his bride and the wedding party. A husband who loves his wife will guard her. He will protect her body, her heart and her honor.

**3:9-10** *A litter King Solomon made for himself from the wood of Lebanon. Its posts he made **of** silver, its back **of** gold, its seat **of** purple; its interior **was** inlaid **with** love from the daughters of Jerusalem.*

"A litter King Solomon made for himself from the wood of Lebanon." The cedars of Lebanon were the finest wood in the ancient world. Solomon used them in the temple and in his palace (1 Kings 5:6; 7:2).

"Its posts he made of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple." Silver, gold and purple were signs of wealth and royalty. Purple dye was very costly, made from shellfish along the coast. No expense was spared.

"Its interior was inlaid with love from the daughters of Jerusalem." The women of the city had lovingly decorated the inside, perhaps with embroidered cushions or coverings. The whole city shared in the joy of the wedding.

What does all this show us? That a wedding is worth celebrating. Marriage is not a small thing. It is a covenant before God and a joy for the whole community. It is right to make it beautiful.

**3:11** *Go out and look, daughters of Zion, on King Solomon, on the crown **with** which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart.*

"Go out and look, daughters of Zion, on King Solomon." Zion is another name for Jerusalem. The women are invited to come and see the king in all his splendor.

"On the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding." This was not the royal crown of his kingship, but a wedding crown, a garland or crown worn by the groom. His mother, Bathsheba, placed it on his head. It was a mark of family blessing on the marriage.

"And on the day of the gladness of his heart." His wedding day was the happiest day of his life. That is how it should be. A man should be glad to marry the woman he loves, and his gladness should be seen.

This scene points beyond itself. The Bible tells of another wedding, when Christ the King will receive His bride. "Let us rejoice and exult, and let us give the glory to Him, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). Paul told the church, "I betrothed you to one husband, to present a pure virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). The joy of Solomon's wedding day is a small picture of the joy of that day, when Jesus, who loved the church and gave Himself for her, will rejoice over His people. For believers, this is not a story about someone else. It is our future.

## Summary

At night, the bride longs for the one her soul loves and cannot find him. She searches the streets and squares of the city, asks the watchmen, and soon finds him. She holds him and brings him to her mother's house, and then, for the second time, she charges the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until it pleases. Then a royal procession comes up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense. It is King Solomon's litter, guarded by sixty mighty men with swords, made of cedar from Lebanon, with silver posts, a gold back and a purple seat, decorated with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. The daughters of Zion are called to see the king wearing the crown his mother gave him on his wedding day, the day of the gladness of his heart.

## Study Questions

1. What does the bride do when she cannot find the one her soul loves? (3:1-2)

2. What does she do when she finds him, and what might bringing him to her mother's house mean? (3:4)

3. Why do you think the bride repeats her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem right before the wedding scene? (3:5)

4. Describe the procession coming up from the wilderness. (3:6-8)

5. What was Solomon's litter made of, and who decorated it? (3:9-10)

6. Who crowned Solomon on his wedding day, and what kind of day was it for him? (3:11)

7. How does this wedding point us to the marriage of Christ and His church? (Revelation 19:7; 2 Corinthians 11:2)

8. What does this chapter teach about the right order of love, waiting and marriage?

9. How can a husband guard and protect his wife the way the mighty men guarded the king's procession?

10. How does knowing that believers are part of the bride of Christ change the way you see your life now?

# Song of Songs 4: You Are Beautiful, My Bride

## Scripture

**4:1-16** Look, you ***are*** beautiful, my darling; look, you ***are*** beautiful; your eyes ***are*** doves behind your veil. Your hair ***is*** like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from the mountain of Gilead. Your teeth ***are*** like the flock of the shorn ***ewes*** that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved ***one*** among them. Your lips ***are*** like a thread of scarlet, and your mouth ***is*** lovely. Your temple ***is*** like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck ***is*** like the tower of David, built in courses; the thousand shields ***are*** hung on it, all the small shields of the mighty men. Your two breasts ***are*** like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which pasture among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go for myself to the mountain of the myrrh and to the hill of the frankincense. All of you ***is*** beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you. With me from Lebanon, bride, with me from Lebanon you will come. You will descend from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Mount Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards. You have stolen my heart, my sister, bride; you have stolen my heart with one of your eyes, with one chain of your necklaces. How beautiful is your love, my sister, bride! How ***much*** better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than all spices! Your lips drip flowing honey, bride; honey and milk ***are*** under your tongue, and the fragrance of your garments ***is*** like the fragrance of Lebanon. A garden locked ***is*** my sister, bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots ***are*** an orchard of pomegranates with fruit of choice things, henna ***plants*** with nard ***plants***, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices. A fountain of gardens, a well of living water, and streams from Lebanon. Awake, north ***wind***, and come, south ***wind***! Make my garden breathe; let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat the fruit of its choice things.

## Preview

This chapter is the bridegroom's song to his bride on their wedding day. He praises her beauty from head to toe in the language of his land: eyes like doves behind her veil, hair like a flock of goats streaming down a hillside, teeth like freshly washed ewes, lips like a scarlet thread, a neck like the tower of David. He tells her, "All of you is beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you."

Now, for the first time, he calls her "bride." He invites her to come with him from the high mountains of Lebanon. She has stolen his heart with one look. He compares her to a locked garden, a sealed fountain, an orchard full of the finest fruits and spices. She has kept herself for him. At the end of the chapter, she answers by inviting him into the garden that is now his. The poem speaks of their wedding night in gentle pictures, and so will we.

## Study

**4:1** *Look, you **are** beautiful, my darling; look, you **are** beautiful; your eyes **are** doves behind your veil. Your hair **is** like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from the mountain of Gilead.*

"Look, you are beautiful, my darling; look, you are beautiful." He begins as he did in 1:15, saying it twice. He cannot say it enough.

"Your eyes are doves behind your veil." Brides wore a veil at their wedding (Genesis 24:65). Through it he sees her eyes, gentle and soft like doves.

"Your hair is like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from the mountain of Gilead." The goats of Israel were mostly black. Gilead was a hilly region east of the Jordan. Picture a herd of black goats flowing down a hillside in the evening light, moving like a wave. That is how her long, dark hair looks as it flows over her shoulders. To us, a comparison to goats sounds odd. To a man of that land, it was a beautiful sight.

These word pictures are not meant to be taken one detail at a time, as though we were drawing her portrait. They are meant to be felt. Each image says, you are lovely, and you move me.

**4:2-3** *Your teeth **are** like the flock of the shorn **ewes** that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved **one** among them. Your lips **are** like a thread of scarlet, and your mouth **is** lovely. Your temple **is** like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil.*

"Your teeth are like the flock of the shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved one among them." Freshly washed sheep are clean and white. Each one has a twin, and none is missing. In a day when many people lost teeth, he is saying her teeth are white, even and complete.

"Your lips are like a thread of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely." Her lips are red and shapely, and her words are lovely too.

"Your temple is like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil." The word may mean her cheek or temple. A cut pomegranate is rosy red. Her cheeks are flushed and lovely, perhaps with the blush of a bride.

**4:4-5** *Your neck **is** like the tower of David, built in courses; the thousand shields **are** hung on it, all the small shields of the mighty men. Your two breasts **are** like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which pasture among the lilies.*

"Your neck is like the tower of David, built in courses; the thousand shields are hung on it, all the small shields of the mighty men." Her neck is tall and graceful, adorned with necklaces like a tower hung with shields. Warriors' shields were sometimes hung on city towers for display (Ezekiel 27:11). The picture is one of dignity and strength. She carries herself with honor.

"Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which pasture among the lilies." He praises her womanly beauty with a gentle and tender picture: two young fawns, soft and graceful.

The image is not crude. It is the language of a husband delighting in his wife. Proverbs tells a husband to rejoice in "the wife of your youth" (Proverbs 5:18), and the Song shows what that rejoicing sounds like.

**4:6-7** *Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go for myself to the mountain of the myrrh and to the hill of the frankincense. All of you **is** beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you.*

"Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go for myself to the mountain of the myrrh and to the hill of the frankincense." He echoes her words from 2:17. Myrrh and frankincense were the most precious spices. In the poem, these fragrant hills picture the bride herself. He is saying that he longs to be with her, through the night until morning. Now that they are married, the waiting of 2:7 and 3:5 is over.

"All of you is beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you." This is the summary of his praise. To his eyes, she is perfect. Does that mean she had no flaws? Of course not. It means his love sees her as wholly beautiful. Love covers a multitude of things.

Here is a beautiful picture of Christ's love for His church. Paul says Christ gave Himself up for the church "so that He might present her to Himself, the church glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any of such things, but that she might be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27). We are full of flaws, but Christ has washed us, and He will present us without blemish.

**4:8** *With me from Lebanon, bride, with me from Lebanon you will come. You will descend from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Mount Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.*

"With me from Lebanon, bride, with me from Lebanon you will come." For the first time in the Song, he calls her "bride." From here to 5:1, he uses the word six times. The wedding has come.

She will come down "from the top of Amana," from the heights of Senir and Hermon, "from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards." These are high, wild mountains in the far north, beyond Israel's borders. Senir is another name for Hermon (Deuteronomy 3:9). Lions and leopards lived there. He calls her to come down from the high, dangerous places to be with him. It may picture leaving behind her old life, or leaving behind her fears and distance, to come close to him in safety. Marriage is a leaving and a cleaving (Genesis 2:24).

**4:9-11** *You have stolen my heart, my sister, bride; you have stolen my heart with one of your eyes, with one chain of your necklaces. How beautiful is your love, my sister, bride! How **much** better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than all spices! Your lips drip flowing honey, bride; honey and milk **are** under your tongue, and the fragrance of your garments **is** like the fragrance of Lebanon.*

"You have stolen my heart, my sister, bride; you have stolen my heart with one of your eyes, with one chain of your necklaces." One look from her, one glimpse of her necklace, and he is undone. "My sister" was a common word of love in that day, meaning someone very close and dear. It does not mean they were related.

"How beautiful is your love, my sister, bride! How much better is your love than wine." He echoes her words from 1:2. She said his love was better than wine. Now he says the same of hers. "And the fragrance of your oils than all spices!"

"Your lips drip flowing honey, bride; honey and milk are under your tongue." Her kisses are sweet, and her words are sweet. Honey and milk remind us of the Promised Land, "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). She is to him a land of plenty and delight. "And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon." The cedars of Lebanon gave off a rich, sweet smell. Everything about her delights him.

**4:12-15** *A garden locked **is** my sister, bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots **are** an orchard of pomegranates with fruit of choice things, henna **plants** with nard **plants**, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices. A fountain of gardens, a well of living water, and streams from Lebanon.*

"A garden locked is my sister, bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed." This is one of the most important pictures in the Song. A locked garden was a private garden, walled and shut to outsiders. A sealed fountain was a spring covered and sealed so no one else could drink from it. She has kept herself pure. She has saved herself for him, and no one else has entered her garden.

This is God's design. Purity before marriage is not a burden. It is a gift a bride and groom give to each other. Proverbs uses the same picture: "Drink water from your own cistern," and let your springs "be for you alone, and not for strangers with you" (Proverbs 5:15, 17).

If you have not kept yourself pure, do not despair. Christ forgives and cleanses all who come to Him. Paul says to people who had lived in sexual sin, "you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified" (1 Corinthians 6:11). God can make a new beginning.

"Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with fruit of choice things, henna plants with nard plants." Now the garden is described. It is full of the best fruit and the rarest spices: "nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices." Many of these were costly imports from far countries. No single garden would really have had them all. He is saying that she is the finest garden in the world, full of every good thing.

"A fountain of gardens, a well of living water, and streams from Lebanon." She is not only locked away. She is also a source of life and refreshment. The "living water" means fresh, flowing water from a spring. To him, she is life itself.

**4:16** *Awake, north **wind**, and come, south **wind**! Make my garden breathe; let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat the fruit of its choice things.*

Now the bride answers. "Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Make my garden breathe; let its spices flow." She calls on the winds to blow through her garden and spread its fragrance. She is ready for him.

"Let my beloved come to his garden and eat the fruit of its choice things." Notice the change. In verse 12 it was a garden locked. Now she calls it "my garden" and then "his garden." She opens what she kept closed and gives it to her husband. This is the moment the whole Song has been waiting for. On their wedding night, in the covenant of marriage, she gives herself to him freely and with joy.

The poem says it with gentle pictures, and that is all we need to say. Within marriage, the physical union of husband and wife is good, holy and blessed by God. "Marriage is to be honorable among all, and the bed undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). The love that waited (2:7; 3:5) now rejoices, and there is no shame in it. As it was in Eden, "they were both of them naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

## Summary

On their wedding day, the bridegroom praises his bride's beauty: eyes like doves behind her veil, hair like a flock of goats streaming down Gilead, teeth like washed twin ewes, lips like a scarlet thread, cheeks like pomegranate, a neck like David's tower hung with shields, and the tender beauty of twin fawns. He tells her that all of her is beautiful and there is no blemish in her. Calling her "bride" for the first time, he invites her to come from the wild northern mountains, and he says she has stolen his heart with one glance. Her love is better than wine, and her kisses are sweet as milk and honey. He calls her a locked garden and a sealed fountain, kept for him alone, an orchard full of the finest fruits and spices, a well of living water. The bride answers by calling the winds to blow on her garden and inviting her beloved to come into his garden, giving herself to her husband in the joy of marriage.

## Study Questions

1. Choose three of the word pictures the bridegroom uses and explain what each one means. (4:1-5)

2. What does he say in verse 7, and how does that point to Christ's love for the church? (4:7; Ephesians 5:27)

3. What new name does he call her in verse 8, and why is it important? (4:8)

4. What does it mean that she has stolen his heart? (4:9)

5. What do the locked garden and the sealed fountain picture? (4:12)

6. How does the bride's invitation in verse 16 show the change that marriage brings? (4:12, 16)

7. What does Hebrews 13:4 teach about marriage and intimacy? (4:16; Hebrews 13:4)

8. Husbands, how often do you tell your wife what you find beautiful in her? Wives, how do you receive and return that love?

9. How does the picture of a locked garden help young people see purity as a gift and not a burden?

10. If you carry regret from the past, how does the forgiveness of Christ give you a new beginning? (1 Corinthians 6:11)

# Song of Songs 5: The Door Opened Too Late

## Scripture

**5:1-8** I have come to my garden, my sister, bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk. Eat, friends; drink and become drunk, beloved ones! I ***was*** sleeping, and my heart ***was*** awake. The sound of my beloved knocking! "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect ***one***, for my head is filled ***with*** dew, my locks ***with*** the drops of night." I have taken off my tunic; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I soil them? My beloved stretched out his hand from the hole, and my inner parts were in turmoil over him. I myself arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped myrrh, and my fingers ***dripped*** flowing myrrh on the handles of the bolt. I myself opened to my beloved, and my beloved had turned away; he had passed on. My soul went out when he spoke. I sought him, and I did not find him; I called him, and he did not answer me. The watchmen who go around in the city found me; they struck me; they bruised me; the watchmen of the walls lifted my shawl from on me. I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I ***am*** sick with love.

**5:9-16** What ***is*** your beloved more than a beloved, beautiful ***one*** among the women? What ***is*** your beloved more than a beloved, that thus you have adjured us? My beloved ***is*** dazzling and ruddy, conspicuous above ten thousand. His head ***is*** gold of pure gold; his locks ***are*** curls, black like the raven. His eyes ***are*** like doves beside channels of water, washing in the milk, sitting on fullness. His cheeks ***are*** like a bed of the spice, towers of aromatic herbs; his lips ***are*** lilies dripping flowing myrrh. His hands ***are*** rods of gold filled with the chrysolite; his abdomen ***is*** a plate of ivory covered ***with*** sapphires. His legs ***are*** pillars of marble founded on bases of pure gold; his appearance ***is*** like Lebanon, choice like the cedars. His mouth ***is*** sweetness, and all of him ***is*** desirable. This ***is*** my beloved, and this ***is*** my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.

## Preview

The chapter opens with the bridegroom's answer to his bride's invitation: "I have come to my garden, my sister, bride." The marriage is joyfully complete, and a voice calls the friends to eat and drink deeply of love. Then the mood changes. Some time later, the bride is asleep when her husband knocks at the door, wet with the night dew, asking her to open. She hesitates. She has already undressed and washed her feet. By the time she gets up and opens the door, he is gone.

She searches the city for him, and this time the watchmen beat her and take her shawl. She begs the daughters of Jerusalem to tell him she is sick with love. They ask her what makes her beloved better than any other, and she answers with a beautiful description of him from head to foot: his head like pure gold, his eyes like doves, his lips like lilies, his body like polished ivory, his legs like pillars of marble. "This is my beloved, and this is my friend." This chapter shows that even a good marriage faces moments of distance, and that love can find its way back.

## Study

**5:1** *I have come to my garden, my sister, bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk. Eat, friends; drink and become drunk, beloved ones!*

"I have come to my garden, my sister, bride." The bridegroom answers her invitation in 4:16. She said, "Let my beloved come to his garden." Now he says, I have come. "I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk." He uses the pictures of chapter 4 to say that their marriage is now complete. He has received her love, and it is sweet. Notice how often he says "my." She has given herself to him, and he receives her as his own treasure.

"Eat, friends; drink and become drunk, beloved ones!" Who says this? Most likely the wedding guests or the friends of the couple, rejoicing with them and blessing their love. Some Bible teachers believe it is the voice of God Himself, the One who made marriage, giving His blessing to the union. The Hebrew does not tell us. Either way, the words are a blessing. The love of husband and wife is to be enjoyed deeply and fully. "Drink and become drunk" is poetry. It means to drink deeply of love, as Proverbs says, "in her love may you be lost continually" (Proverbs 5:19). It is not permission for drunkenness, which Scripture forbids (Ephesians 5:18).

**5:2** *I **was** sleeping, and my heart **was** awake. The sound of my beloved knocking! "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect **one**, for my head is filled **with** dew, my locks **with** the drops of night."*

"I was sleeping, and my heart was awake." Time has passed. The bride is now a wife. She is asleep, but her mind is half awake, perhaps dreaming. This scene, like 3:1-4, may be a dream.

"The sound of my beloved knocking!" Her husband has been out, and he comes to the door late at night. "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one." He uses four tender names for her. "For my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of night." He has been out in the cold night air, and he is wet with dew. He wants to come inside.

**5:3** *I have taken off my tunic; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I soil them?*

"I have taken off my tunic; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I soil them?" She hesitates. She has already gone to bed. She has taken off her outer clothing and washed her feet, which in that land got dusty walking on dirt floors and roads. To get up now would be a bother.

These are small excuses. She is not angry with him. She is just comfortable and does not want to be disturbed. But love does not always come at a convenient time.

Many marriages suffer not from great betrayals but from small moments like this: being too tired, too busy or too comfortable to respond to a spouse's need or love. It is so easy to say, not now. But "not now" said often enough becomes distance.

**5:4-5** *My beloved stretched out his hand from the hole, and my inner parts were in turmoil over him. I myself arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped myrrh, and my fingers* ***dripped*** *flowing myrrh on the handles of the bolt.*

"My beloved stretched out his hand from the hole, and my inner parts were in turmoil over him." Doors in that day often had a hole near the latch, so a person could reach in and open it from outside. He tries to open the door himself. Seeing his hand, her heart is stirred. She feels her love for him rush back.

"I myself arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped myrrh, and my fingers dripped flowing myrrh on the handles of the bolt." She gets up and goes to the door. Her hands are perfumed with myrrh. Some think he left myrrh on the latch as a sign of his love. Others think she had perfumed herself. Either way, she is now eager to see him.

**5:6** *I myself opened to my beloved, and my beloved had turned away; he had passed on. My soul went out when he spoke. I sought him, and I did not find him; I called him, and he did not answer me.*

"I myself opened to my beloved, and my beloved had turned away; he had passed on." She was too late. He had gone. "My soul went out when he spoke." Her heart sank when she remembered his words. "I sought him, and I did not find him; I called him, and he did not answer me."

This is a sad moment. Her delay cost her his presence. She opened the door, but too late.

Many Christians have heard in this passage a picture of the Lord knocking at the door of our hearts, and of how we sometimes delay to answer Him. Jesus said, "Look, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him" (Revelation 3:20). The Song is first about a husband and wife, but the lesson fits our walk with God too. When He calls, answer quickly. Do not let comfort keep you from Him.

**5:7** *The watchmen who go around in the city found me; they struck me; they bruised me; the watchmen of the walls lifted my shawl from on me.*

"The watchmen who go around in the city found me; they struck me; they bruised me; the watchmen of the walls lifted my shawl from on me." She goes out into the city searching for him. In 3:3 the watchmen simply found her. This time they beat her and take her shawl. Perhaps they mistook her for a woman of bad character, wandering the streets alone. She is hurt and humiliated.

This is a painful verse. Those who should have protected her harmed her. Some readers of this study may know what it is to be hurt by people who were supposed to keep them safe. Scripture does not hide it, and God sees it. "The LORD is near to the broken of heart" (Psalm 34:18). If you are being harmed, please tell someone you trust and get help. And whether this scene is a dream or not, it shows how much her delay cost her. A small moment of hesitation led to a night of pain.

**5:8** *I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I **am** sick with love.*

"I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I am sick with love." In spite of everything, her love for him has not cooled. She begs the women: if you see him, tell him I love him and long for him. This is not the refrain of 2:7 and 3:5, but it begins the same way. Instead of a warning, it is a plea.

She does not blame him. She does not say, if you see him, tell him he should not have left. She says, tell him I love him. That is the beginning of healing in any marriage.

**5:9** *What **is** your beloved more than a beloved, beautiful **one** among the women? What **is** your beloved more than a beloved, that thus you have adjured us?*

The daughters of Jerusalem answer: "What is your beloved more than a beloved, beautiful one among the women? What is your beloved more than a beloved, that thus you have adjured us?" In other words, what makes him so special? Why should we help you look for him? What is so great about this man?

Their question gives her a chance to say what she loves about him. Sometimes, when love has cooled for a moment, the best thing to do is to remember and say out loud what you love about the other person.

**5:10-11** *My beloved **is** dazzling and ruddy, conspicuous above ten thousand. His head **is** gold of pure gold; his locks **are** curls, black like the raven.*

"My beloved is dazzling and ruddy, conspicuous above ten thousand." She begins her answer. He is radiant and healthy, with a ruddy complexion. David was described as ruddy too (1 Samuel 16:12). He stands out above ten thousand men. In a crowd, she would pick him out at once.

"His head is gold of pure gold; his locks are curls, black like the raven." His head is precious and noble, like the finest gold. His hair is thick, wavy and black.

In chapter 4 he praised her from head to toe. Now she praises him the same way. Love in the Song is never one-sided.

**5:12-13** *His eyes **are** like doves beside channels of water, washing in the milk, sitting on fullness. His cheeks **are** like a bed of the spice, towers of aromatic herbs; his lips **are** lilies dripping flowing myrrh.*

"His eyes are like doves beside channels of water, washing in the milk, sitting on fullness." He praised her eyes as doves (1:15; 4:1). Now she says the same of his. Picture white doves by a stream, gleaming as if washed in milk. His eyes are clear, bright and gentle. "Sitting on fullness" may mean they are set well, like jewels in a ring.

"His cheeks are like a bed of the spice, towers of aromatic herbs." His cheeks, perhaps with a beard, are fragrant, as men often perfumed their beards. "His lips are lilies dripping flowing myrrh." His words, and his kisses, are sweet and fragrant.

**5:14-16** *His hands **are** rods of gold filled with the chrysolite; his abdomen **is** a plate of ivory covered **with** sapphires. His legs **are** pillars of marble founded on bases of pure gold; his appearance **is** like Lebanon, choice like the cedars. His mouth **is** sweetness, and all of him **is** desirable. This **is** my beloved, and this **is** my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.*

"His hands are rods of gold filled with the chrysolite." His fingers are like golden rods set with precious stones, perhaps with rings on them. His hands are strong and fine.

"His abdomen is a plate of ivory covered with sapphires." His body is smooth and strong, like polished ivory set with blue stones. She describes a man in his strength, in the modest language of art: he is like a statue of the finest materials.

"His legs are pillars of marble founded on bases of pure gold." He is steady, strong and firm, like marble pillars. "His appearance is like Lebanon, choice like the cedars." He is majestic, like the tall cedars of Lebanon.

"His mouth is sweetness, and all of him is desirable." She sums it all up. Everything about him is lovely. Earlier he told her "All of you is beautiful" (4:7). Now she says "all of him is desirable."

"This is my beloved, and this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem." This may be the most beautiful line in the chapter. He is not only her beloved, the man she desires. He is her friend. A strong marriage needs both. Romance without friendship burns out. Friendship without romance grows cold. She has both in him.

Christians have often read this description and thought of Jesus, who is "more handsome than the sons of mankind," and of whom the psalm says "grace has been poured on Your lips" (Psalm 45:2). For a believer, Christ is the One who is "conspicuous above ten thousand," and "all of him is desirable." If someone asked you, what is your Beloved more than any other, could you tell them what you love about Jesus? That is a good question to answer.

## Summary

The bridegroom answers his bride's invitation: he has come into his garden, and the marriage is complete, while a voice calls the friends to eat and drink deeply of love. Later, the bride is asleep when her husband knocks at the door, wet with dew, asking her to open. She hesitates because she has undressed and washed her feet. When she finally opens, he is gone. She searches the city, and the watchmen beat her and take her shawl. She begs the daughters of Jerusalem to tell him she is sick with love. When they ask what makes her beloved better than any other, she describes him from head to foot: radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand, with a head like gold, eyes like doves, lips like lilies, hands of gold, a body like ivory, legs like marble pillars and an appearance like the cedars of Lebanon. All of him is desirable. He is her beloved and her friend.

## Study Questions

1. What does the bridegroom say in verse 1, and what does the call to "Eat, friends" tell us about God's view of married love? (5:1)

2. What does the husband ask when he knocks, and why does his wife hesitate? (5:2-3)

3. What happened when she finally opened the door? (5:6)

4. What did the watchmen do to her? How is that different from 3:3? (5:7)

5. What message did she want the daughters of Jerusalem to give him? (5:8)

6. What question did the daughters ask, and how did she answer it? (5:9-16)

7. What two names does she give him in verse 16, and why do both matter in a marriage? (5:16)

8. Have you ever said "not now" to someone you love, or to God, and regretted it? What did you learn?

9. If your love for your spouse or for God has cooled, what would it look like to remember and speak out loud what you love about them?

10. If someone asked you what makes Jesus better than anyone else, what would you say?

# Song of Songs 6: Love Restored

## Scripture

**6:1-13** Where has your beloved gone, beautiful ***one*** among the women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of the spice, to pasture in the gardens and to gather lilies. I ***am*** my beloved's, and my beloved ***is*** mine, who pastures among the lilies. You ***are*** beautiful, my darling, like Tirzah, lovely like Jerusalem, fearsome like the ***troops*** with banners. Turn your eyes away from before me, for they have overwhelmed me. Your hair ***is*** like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from Gilead. Your teeth ***are*** like the flock of the ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved ***one*** among them. Your temple ***is*** like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil. Sixty queens ***are*** they, and eighty concubines, and young women without number. One ***is*** she, my dove, my perfect ***one***; one ***is*** she to her mother; pure ***is*** she to her who bore her. Daughters saw her, and they called her blessed; queens and concubines, and they praised her. Who ***is*** this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful like the full moon, pure like the sun, fearsome like the ***troops*** with banners? To a garden of nuts I went down, to look at the green shoots of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded, ***whether*** the pomegranates had bloomed. I did not know; my soul set me ***on*** the chariots of my noble people. Return, return, Shulammite; return, return, that we may look on you. What will you look at in the Shulammite, as ***at*** the dance of the two camps?

## Preview

After the bride's beautiful description of her husband, the daughters of Jerusalem want to help her find him. She answers that she knows where he is: he has gone down to his garden. Then she says again, with the order turned around, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." The distance of chapter 5 is over.

The husband speaks, and there is no hint of blame. He praises her as beautiful as the city of Tirzah and lovely as Jerusalem, awe-inspiring like an army with banners. He repeats some of the praise from their wedding day, to show that his love has not changed. There may be sixty queens and eighty concubines and young women without number, but she is the one, his dove, his perfect one, and even the queens praise her. The chapter ends with a hard-to-translate verse and a call: "Return, return, Shulammite," so that all may look on her.

## Study

**6:1** *Where has your beloved gone, beautiful* ***one*** *among the women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?*

"Where has your beloved gone, beautiful one among the women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?" The daughters of Jerusalem were moved by her description of him in chapter 5. Now they want to help her look for him. When we speak well of someone we love, others want to know him too.

This is true of our witness for Christ. When believers speak with love and joy about Jesus, others become curious. They want to know where to find Him. The bride's praise of her beloved made others want to seek him.

**6:2-3** *My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of the spice, to pasture in the gardens and to gather lilies. I **am** my beloved's, and my beloved **is** mine, who pastures among the lilies.*

"My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of the spice, to pasture in the gardens and to gather lilies." She suddenly knows where he is. His garden, as we have seen, is the bride herself (4:12-16; 5:1). Some think she means a real garden where he likes to go. Many think it is a poetic way of saying that he has come back to her. He has not gone far after all. His heart is still with her.

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine, who pastures among the lilies." She repeats the words of 2:16, but in a different order. In 2:16 she said, "My beloved is mine, and I am his." Now she says first, "I am my beloved's." Early love often thinks first of what it has. Mature love thinks first of whom it belongs to. After the hard night of chapter 5, she has learned to give herself first.

That is a lesson for every marriage. Love grows when each one thinks first, I belong to you, and only then, you belong to me. It is also the heart of the Christian life. We are not our own. We were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We belong to Christ first, and then we can say, He is mine.

**6:4** *You **are** beautiful, my darling, like Tirzah, lovely like Jerusalem, fearsome like the **troops** with banners.*

Now the husband speaks. "You are beautiful, my darling, like Tirzah, lovely like Jerusalem." Tirzah was a beautiful city in the north whose name means pleasant or delightful. Jerusalem was the capital, the city of the king. He compares her to the two loveliest cities in the land.

"Fearsome like the troops with banners." This seems like an odd thing to say to your wife, but he means that her beauty is overwhelming, awe-inspiring. She takes his breath away, like the sight of an army marching with its banners raised.

Notice what he does not say. He does not scold her for keeping him waiting at the door. He does not bring up the night she failed to open. He simply tells her she is beautiful. That is forgiveness. Love "does not count the evil" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Paul says, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

**6:5-7** *Turn your eyes away from before me, for they have overwhelmed me. Your hair **is** like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from Gilead. Your teeth **are** like the flock of the ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved **one** among them. Your temple **is** like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil.*

"Turn your eyes away from before me, for they have overwhelmed me." Her eyes are so beautiful that he cannot bear to look at them. He is lovestruck.

"Your hair is like the flock of the goats that have streamed down from Gilead. Your teeth are like the flock of the ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and there is no bereaved one among them. Your temple is like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil." These words are almost the same as his praise on their wedding day (4:1-3). Why does he repeat them?

He is telling her that nothing has changed. The love he felt on their wedding day is the same love he feels now. Their quarrel or their distance did not lessen it. He sees her with the same eyes. Couples who have been married many years should still be able to say what they said on their wedding day, and mean it.

**6:8-9** *Sixty queens **are** they, and eighty concubines, and young women without number. One **is** she, my dove, my perfect **one**; one **is** she to her mother; pure **is** she to her who bore her. Daughters saw her, and they called her blessed; queens and concubines, and they praised her.*

"Sixty queens are they, and eighty concubines, and young women without number." Kings in that day had many wives and concubines. This verse may describe Solomon's court at the time, or it may simply be saying, however many other women there may be, it makes no difference. As we noted in the Background, Solomon later took far more wives than this, and they turned his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:3-4).

"One is she, my dove, my perfect one." Against all the others, there is only one for him. She is unique. This is the heart of God's design for marriage: one man and one woman, each the only one for the other. The Song lifts up that ideal, even in a world where kings did otherwise.

"One is she to her mother; pure is she to her who bore her." She was her mother's special joy. "Daughters saw her, and they called her blessed; queens and concubines, and they praised her." Even the other women recognize her worth and praise her. Proverbs says of the worthy wife, "Her sons rise up and call her blessed; her husband, and he praises her" (Proverbs 31:28).

**6:10** *Who **is** this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful like the full moon, pure like the sun, fearsome like the **troops** with banners?*

"Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful like the full moon, pure like the sun, fearsome like the troops with banners?" This may be the voice of the queens and concubines praising her, or of the husband himself. She rises like the dawn. She is as beautiful as the full moon and as bright as the sun. Her beauty is overwhelming, like an army with banners.

The Hebrew words for moon and sun here are poetic words meaning the white one and the hot one. The picture is of growing light: dawn, then moon, then sun. She shines more and more. That is how love sees the one it loves. And it is how God sees His people: "the path of righteous ones is like the light of brightness, going on and shining until the day is established" (Proverbs 4:18).

**6:11-12** *To a garden of nuts I went down, to look at the green shoots of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded,* ***whether*** *the pomegranates had bloomed. I did not know; my soul set me* ***on*** *the chariots of my noble people.*

"To a garden of nuts I went down, to look at the green shoots of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded, whether the pomegranates had bloomed." Someone, most likely the bride, went down to a walnut orchard to see if spring had come, if the vines and pomegranates were in bloom. In the Song, spring is the season of love (2:11-13). She is checking whether their love has blossomed again.

"I did not know; my soul set me on the chariots of my noble people." This is one of the hardest verses in the Bible to translate. The Hebrew words are unclear, and translators have rendered it many different ways. One common understanding is that before she knew it, her heart carried her away with joy, as if she were riding in a royal chariot. Love had come back to her, and she was swept up in it. We should be humble about a verse like this and not build anything on it.

**6:13** *Return, return, Shulammite; return, return, that we may look on you. What will you look at in the Shulammite, as* ***at*** *the dance of the two camps?*

"Return, return, Shulammite; return, return, that we may look on you." This is the only place in the Song where her name or title, Shulammite, appears. The daughters of Jerusalem, or a crowd, call her to come back so they can look at her. Perhaps she is leaving in the chariot of verse 12, and they do not want her to go.

"What will you look at in the Shulammite, as at the dance of the two camps?" The answer may be hers or her husband's. The dance of the two camps may refer to a well-known dance, perhaps connected to Mahanaim, a place whose name means two camps (Genesis 32:2). The picture is of a woman dancing with joy, while everyone watches. Some take the question as the bride's modest objection: why would you want to look at me? Others take it as the husband's reply: you will see something worth seeing.

By the end of this chapter, the distance of chapter 5 is gone. The bride is restored, praised and full of joy. Love that is tested and forgiven can come back stronger than before.

## Summary

The daughters of Jerusalem offer to help the bride find her beloved, and she says he has gone down to his garden, a picture of his return to her. She declares, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." Her husband praises her without a word of blame: she is beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem and awe-inspiring like an army with banners. He repeats his wedding-day praise of her hair, teeth and cheeks, showing that his love has not changed. Among sixty queens, eighty concubines and countless young women, she is the one, his dove, his perfect one, and even the queens praise her. She looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon and pure as the sun. She goes down to the orchard to see if spring has come, and her heart is swept away with joy. The chapter ends with a call for the Shulammite to return, so all may look on her as she dances.

## Study Questions

1. Why did the daughters of Jerusalem want to help the bride find her beloved? (6:1; 5:10-16)

2. Where had her beloved gone? (6:2)

3. How is 6:3 different from 2:16, and what might the change mean? (6:3; 2:16)

4. What does the husband say to his wife after the distance of chapter 5? What does he not say? (6:4)

5. Why do you think he repeats his wedding-day praise from chapter 4? (6:5-7; 4:1-3)

6. How does the bride compare to the sixty queens and eighty concubines? (6:8-9)

7. What does the call "Return, return, Shulammite" tell us about how others saw her? (6:13)

8. How does this chapter show forgiveness in marriage? How can you show that kind of forgiveness?

9. Do you think first of what belongs to you, or of whom you belong to? How does that apply to your relationship with Christ?

10. When others hear you talk about Jesus, does it make them want to seek Him?

# Song of Songs 7: The Delight of Married Love

## Scripture

**7:1-13** How beautiful are your feet in the sandals, daughter of a noble! The curves of your thighs ***are*** like jewels, the work of the hands of a craftsman. Your navel ***is*** a rounded bowl; let it not lack the mixed wine. Your belly ***is*** a heap of wheat fenced around with lilies. Your two breasts ***are*** like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck ***is*** like the tower of ivory; your eyes ***are*** pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim; your nose ***is*** like the tower of Lebanon, which watches the face of Damascus. Your head on you ***is*** like Carmel, and the hair of your head ***is*** like the purple; a king is bound by the tresses. How beautiful you are, and how pleasant you are, love, in delights! This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts ***are like*** clusters. I said, "I will go up on the palm tree; let me take hold of its fruit stalks. And let your breasts be, please, like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your nose like the apples, and your mouth like the good wine, going to my beloved smoothly, gliding ***over*** the lips of sleepers." I ***am*** my beloved's, and his desire ***is*** toward me. Come, my beloved, let us go out ***to*** the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us rise early to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded, ***whether*** the blossom has opened, ***whether*** the pomegranates have bloomed. There I will give my love to you. The mandrakes have given forth fragrance, and over our doorways ***are*** all choice things, new and also old, my beloved, ***which*** I have stored up for you.

## Preview

The husband praises his wife once more, this time from her feet upward, likely as she dances (6:13). He calls her a "daughter of a noble." He uses pictures of jewels, a bowl of wine, a heap of wheat, towers and pools, Mount Carmel and royal purple to say that she is beautiful in every way, and that "a king is bound by the tresses" of her hair. He compares her to a tall palm tree and says how much he delights in her. This is the most intimate praise in the book, and it is the praise of a husband for his wife within marriage. We will explain what the pictures mean simply and modestly.

Then the bride answers with a beautiful line: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me." She invites him to go out with her into the countryside, to stay in the villages, to rise early and see the vineyards in bloom. There, she says, she will give him her love. She has stored up delights for him, new and old. This is love that has grown more secure and more joyful after the testing of chapter 5.

## Study

**7:1** *How beautiful are your feet in the sandals, daughter of a noble! The curves of your thighs* ***are*** *like jewels, the work of the hands of a craftsman.*

"How beautiful are your feet in the sandals, daughter of a noble!" In chapter 4 he praised her from her head down. Now he begins with her feet and moves upward. Some think she is dancing, since 6:13 spoke of a dance, and he is admiring her graceful steps. He calls her "daughter of a noble."

The country girl who worked in the vineyards (1:6) is now a princess in his eyes. Love lifts the one it loves.

"The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a craftsman." Her form is graceful and finely shaped, like jewelry made by a master artist. He is praising God's handiwork in her. David said, "I will give thanks to You, because in awesome ways I am distinguished" (Psalm 139:14). The husband sees that beauty in his wife.

**7:2-3** *Your navel **is** a rounded bowl; let it not lack the mixed wine. Your belly **is** a heap of wheat fenced around with lilies. Your two breasts **are** like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.*

"Your navel is a rounded bowl; let it not lack the mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat fenced around with lilies." The pictures here are of plenty and celebration. A bowl of mixed wine was served at feasts. A heap of wheat after harvest meant food for the year and was a sign of blessing. Lilies are the flowers of the Song, linked to her beauty and to love. He is saying that she is to him a feast, a harvest, a full blessing. In that day, a woman with a healthy, full form was a picture of life and fruitfulness.

"Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle." He repeats the gentle picture from 4:5. It is tender, not crude. As we have seen, Proverbs encourages a husband to delight in his own wife (Proverbs 5:18-19). The Song gives voice to that delight in language a church can read aloud.

**7:4-5** *Your neck **is** like the tower of ivory; your eyes **are** pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim; your nose **is** like the tower of Lebanon, which watches the face of Damascus. Your head on you **is** like Carmel, and the hair of your head **is** like the purple; a king is bound by the tresses.*

"Your neck is like the tower of ivory." Her neck is tall, smooth and graceful. "Your eyes are pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim." Heshbon was a city east of the Jordan known for its reservoirs. Her eyes are deep, clear and still, like quiet pools. "Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, which watches the face of Damascus." This sounds strange to us, but a tower stood for strength and dignity. He is praising the noble shape of her face and the dignity of her bearing.

"Your head on you is like Carmel, and the hair of your head is like the purple." Mount Carmel rises above the sea, covered with green forest. Her head is crowned with beauty like that mountain. Her hair is so dark and rich that it shines with a purple sheen, the color of royalty. "A king is bound by the tresses." The king, her husband, is captured by her hair. He cannot look away. The most powerful man in the land is held captive by his wife's beauty.

**7:6-9** *How beautiful you are, and how pleasant you are, love, in delights! This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts **are like** clusters. I said, "I will go up on the palm tree; let me take hold of its fruit stalks. And let your breasts be, please, like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your nose like the apples, and your mouth like the good wine, going to my beloved smoothly, gliding **over** the lips of sleepers."*

"How beautiful you are, and how pleasant you are, love, in delights!" He sums up his feelings. He does not just say she is beautiful. He says she is a delight. Love is not only about looks. It is about joy in the whole person.

"This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like clusters." The date palm is tall and graceful, and its fruit hangs in clusters. She is tall and lovely to him.

"I said, I will go up on the palm tree; let me take hold of its fruit stalks." Using the picture of the palm, he says that he desires her and wants to be close to her. These are the words of a husband to his wife, and the poem keeps them in picture language. The Bible is not shy about saying that a husband's desire for his wife is good and right. It is part of God's gift.

"And let your breasts be, please, like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your nose like the apples, and your mouth like the good wine." Grapes, apples and wine are all pictures of sweetness and refreshment. Her love refreshes him like the best fruit and the best wine. Then she seems to finish his sentence: "going to my beloved smoothly, gliding over the lips of sleepers." The good wine of their love flows to him smoothly, and it is so gentle and sweet that it fills them with rest.

What should a church group take from verses like these? First, that God approves of married love, the physical part included, and does not want husbands and wives to be ashamed of it. Second, that this love is spoken of in words of honor and tenderness. It is never cheap, mocking or crude. Third, that this delight belongs inside marriage. The man speaking is her husband. Our culture has often cheapened this gift. The Song lifts it back up to where God placed it.

**7:10** *I **am** my beloved's, and his desire **is** toward me.*

"I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me." This is the third time the bride states that she belongs to him (2:16; 6:3). But this time she does not add that he is hers. She says, "his desire is toward me." She is so secure in his love that she does not need to claim him. She knows he wants her.

The Hebrew word for "desire" here is used in only two other places in the Old Testament. One of them is Genesis 3:16, where God tells Eve after the fall, "to your husband shall be your desire, and he shall rule over you." Sin brought struggle and imbalance into marriage. In the Song, we see a picture of love as God meant it to be: a husband whose desire is toward his wife, and a wife who rests secure in his love. Many Bible teachers see here a glimpse of marriage restored, the way Christ restores what sin broke. Husbands, does your wife know that your desire is toward her? Does she feel secure in your love?

**7:11-13** *Come, my beloved, let us go out **to** the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us rise early to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded, **whether** the blossom has opened, **whether** the pomegranates have bloomed. There I will give my love to you. The mandrakes have given forth fragrance, and over our doorways **are** all choice things, new and also old, my beloved, **which** I have stored up for you.*

"Come, my beloved, let us go out to the field; let us lodge in the villages." The bride takes the lead and invites him to get away together. She wants to leave the city and the palace behind and spend time in the countryside, where she grew up.

"Let us rise early to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded, whether the blossom has opened, whether the pomegranates have bloomed." It is spring again (2:11-13; 6:11). She wants to share the beauty of the season with him. "There I will give my love to you." She promises herself to him, freely and joyfully. In chapter 5, she hesitated to open the door. Now she is the one inviting him.

"The mandrakes have given forth fragrance." Mandrakes were plants with a strong, pleasant smell that people in that day believed helped love and the bearing of children. Rachel and Leah traded over mandrakes in Genesis 30:14-16. Here they are a sign that it is the season for love.

"And over our doorways are all choice things, new and also old, my beloved, which I have stored up for you." She has saved up delights for him, both new ones and old ones. Married love should have both. The old delights, the memories, habits and joys of years together, are precious. But there should also be new ones. A couple married forty years can still surprise each other, still find new ways to show love. She has kept these treasures for him alone.

This is a wonderful picture of what marriage can become. After the courtship, the wedding, the testing and the forgiveness, love is not tired or dull. It is fresh, secure, generous and full of joy. That is God's design. And it reminds us of the love of Christ for His church, which never grows old, and which He promises to renew in us every day (Lamentations 3:22-23).

## Summary

The husband praises his wife from her feet upward, calling her the daughter of a noble. He compares her form to jewels made by a craftsman, and uses pictures of a bowl of mixed wine, a heap of wheat fenced with lilies, twin fawns, an ivory tower, the pools of Heshbon, the tower of Lebanon, Mount Carmel and royal purple, saying that a king is held captive by her hair. He calls her a delight and compares her to a palm tree whose fruit he longs to take, and her love to the best wine. The bride answers, "I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me." She invites him to go out to the fields and villages, to rise early and see whether the vines and pomegranates have bloomed, and promises to give him her love there. The mandrakes are fragrant, and she has stored up delights for him, both new and old.

I have been married to my wife for 38 years. One new way I want to show her love is to give her more focused time. Not time left over, but time set apart for her. The Song of Songs reminds me that love grows when we pay attention.

## Study Questions

1. What does the husband call his wife in verse 1, and how does it compare to how she described herself in 1:6? (7:1; 1:6)

2. What pictures of plenty and celebration does he use in verses 2 and 3? (7:2-3)

3. What does "a king is bound by the tresses" mean? (7:5)

4. What three things can a church group learn from the husband's praise in verses 6 to 9? (7:6-9)

5. How is the bride's statement in verse 10 different from 2:16 and 6:3? (7:10; 2:16; 6:3)

6. How does "his desire is toward me" compare with Genesis 3:16? (7:10; Genesis 3:16)

7. What does the bride invite her husband to do, and what has she stored up for him? (7:11-13)

8. How does the bride's invitation in this chapter show growth since chapter 5?

9. If you are married, what are some old delights you treasure, and what is one new way you could show love to your spouse?

10. How can believers help restore a healthy, honorable view of married love in a world that has cheapened it?

# Song of Songs 8: Love Is Strong Like Death

## Scripture

**8:1-14** Who will make you like a brother to me, nursing at the breasts of my mother? I would find you outside; I would kiss you; also they would not despise me. I would lead you; I would bring you into the house of my mother; she would teach me; I would give you to drink from the spiced wine, from the juice of my pomegranate. His left ***hand is*** under my head, and his right ***hand*** embraces me. I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: why would you rouse, and why would you arouse the love until it pleases? Who ***is*** this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I aroused you; there your mother was in labor with you; there she was in labor ***and*** bore you. Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm, for love ***is*** strong like death, jealousy ***is*** hard like Sheol; its flashes ***are*** flashes of fire, a flame of ***the*** LORD. Many waters are not able to quench the love, and rivers will not overflow it. If a man would give all the wealth of his house for the love, they would utterly despise him. We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? If she ***is*** a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver; and if she ***is*** a door, we will enclose her ***with*** a board of cedar. I ***am*** a wall, and my breasts ***are*** like the towers; then I was in his eyes like one who finds peace. A vineyard belonged to Solomon at Baal-hamon; he gave the vineyard to the keepers; each man would bring for its fruit a thousand ***pieces of*** silver. My vineyard, which ***is*** mine, ***is*** before me. The thousand ***is*** for you, Solomon, and two hundred for those who keep its fruit. You who dwell in the gardens, companions are listening for your voice; make me hear ***it***. Flee, my beloved, and be for yourself like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of spices.

## Preview

The bride wishes she could show her love for her husband openly, even in public, the way a sister could kiss a brother without anyone thinking it wrong. She longs to bring him to her mother's house. She rests in his arms and gives her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem for the third and last time: do not awaken love until it pleases. Then the couple is seen coming up from the wilderness together, she leaning on him.

At the heart of this chapter, and of the whole Song, are verses 6 and 7: "Set me like the seal on your heart." Love is strong like death. Its jealousy is unyielding as the grave. Its flames are a flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench it, and no fortune can buy it. The book ends with the bride's brothers remembering how they guarded their little sister, her testimony that she kept herself pure, a word about Solomon's vineyard and her own, and a last call for her beloved to come quickly.

## Study

**8:1-2** *Who will make you like a brother to me, nursing at the breasts of my mother? I would find you outside; I would kiss you; also they would not despise me. I would lead you; I would bring you into the house of my mother; she would teach me; I would give you to drink from the spiced wine, from the juice of my pomegranate.*

"Who will make you like a brother to me, nursing at the breasts of my mother? I would find you outside; I would kiss you; also they would not despise me." In that culture, it was not proper for a husband and wife to show affection in public. But a sister could kiss her brother in the street, and no one would think anything of it. The bride wishes she could show her love for her husband freely anywhere, without fear of what people would say.

"I would lead you; I would bring you into the house of my mother; she would teach me; I would give you to drink from the spiced wine, from the juice of my pomegranate." She wants to bring him home to her family, where she grew up, and to give him the best she has. Spiced wine and pomegranate juice were special drinks. She longs to share her life and her love with him fully.

**8:3** *His left **hand is** under my head, and his right **hand** embraces me.*

"His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me." These are the same words as 2:6. Then she was longing for this embrace before the wedding. Now she is a wife, and she rests in it. What she waited for, she now enjoys.

**8:4** *I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: why would you rouse, and why would you arouse the love until it pleases?*

"I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem: why would you rouse, and why would you arouse the love until it pleases?" This is the third and final time she gives this charge (2:7; 3:5). This time it is shorter. She leaves out the gazelles and does, and she asks it as a question: why would you do it? Why would anyone stir up love before its time, when it is so much better to wait?

She has lived the whole story now: the longing, the waiting, the wedding, the joy, the hard night and the restoring. From the far side of marriage, she looks back and tells the young women: it was worth the wait. Do not rush it. Love is too strong and too precious to awaken carelessly. God's timing for love is not a cage. It is a protection.

**8:5** *Who **is** this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I aroused you; there your mother was in labor with you; there she was in labor **and** bore you.*

"Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?" This echoes 3:6, when the wedding procession came up from the wilderness. Then it was a grand royal parade. Now it is simply a husband and wife walking together, and she is leaning on him. The question may come from the daughters of Jerusalem watching them return.

That is a beautiful picture of a mature marriage. Not the show of the wedding day, but two people who have walked through hard places together and now lean on each other. It is also a picture of the believer leaning on Christ through the wilderness of this life.

"Under the apple tree I aroused you; there your mother was in labor with you; there she was in labor and bore you." The bride speaks to her husband. In 2:3 she compared him to an apple tree. Now she remembers a place, perhaps the very place where his own mother gave birth to him, or where she first stirred his love. Love remembers where it began.

**8:6** *Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm, for love **is** strong like death, jealousy **is** hard like Sheol; its flashes **are** flashes of fire, a flame of **the** LORD.*

This verse and the next are the high point of the Song.

"Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm." A seal in the ancient world was a stone or ring carved with a person's mark. It was pressed into clay or wax to sign a document and show who owned something. People wore their seal on a cord around the neck, over the heart, or as a ring on the hand or arm (Genesis 38:18). A seal was precious, personal and never given away. It stood for a person's very identity.

The bride asks her husband to set her like a seal on his heart and on his arm. On his heart, so that she is always in his love and thoughts. On his arm, so that she is always in his strength and in all he does. She wants to belong to him completely and forever. It is a picture of the covenant of marriage, a lifelong, exclusive bond.

God uses the same picture of His love for His people. He says, "I have engraved you on My palms" (Isaiah 49:16). And believers in Christ have been "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). God has put His seal on us. We belong to Him.

"For love is strong like death." Why compare love to death? Because death is the one power no one can resist. When death comes, it takes hold and does not let go. The bride says true love is like that. It cannot be turned back. It holds on and will not let go.

"Jealousy is hard like Sheol." Sheol, the grave, never gives back what it takes. Jealousy here does not mean the sinful envy that resents another person's good. It means a burning zeal to guard what is rightly yours. A husband is right to be jealous for his wife's love, and a wife for her husband's, in the sense that neither will share that love with another. God Himself is called "a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14), because He will not share His people's worship with idols. Paul told the church, "I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God; for I betrothed you to one husband" (2 Corinthians 11:2). True love is not casual. It is fierce in its faithfulness.

"Its flashes are flashes of fire, a flame of the LORD." Love burns like fire. And here, for the only time in the Song, the name of the LORD appears. The Hebrew word for flame ends with Yah, the short form of God's name. Some translators take it as a way of saying a mighty flame, the greatest of flames. The SLB translates it "a flame of the LORD." Either way, the meaning is clear. True love is a fire that God Himself kindled. It comes from Him. He is its source.

That is the answer to why the Song is in the Bible. God's name is hidden in the poem until here, at the very center of its message. The love of husband and wife is not just a human feeling. It is a flame that God lit. When we honor it, we honor Him. When we cheapen it, we despise His gift.

**8:7** *Many waters are not able to quench the love, and rivers will not overflow it. If a man would give all the wealth of his house for the love, they would utterly despise him.*

"Many waters are not able to quench the love, and rivers will not overflow it." Fire is put out by water. But this fire cannot be put out. Floods of trouble, hardship, time, sickness, distance and pain cannot drown real love. In Scripture, many waters often picture overwhelming troubles (Psalm 69:1). True love survives them all. That is why couples promise to love each other in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until death parts them. Real love is tested by the waters, and it does not go out.

"If a man would give all the wealth of his house for the love, they would utterly despise him." Love cannot be bought. A man who thinks he can buy love with money would be laughed at. You can buy a body's time, but not a heart's love. Love must be given freely. Solomon, who had more wealth than anyone, knew that his gold could not buy what the bride gave him freely.

These two verses point us to the love of God in Christ. His love is the true "strong like death" love. In fact, it is stronger than death. Jesus went into death for us, and death could not hold Him. Paul asks, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" and answers that "neither death nor life," nor anything else in all creation, "will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35, 38-39). Many waters did not quench His love. The floods of God's judgment against sin rolled over Him at the cross, and His love did not go out.

And His love cannot be bought. We could never pay for it with all the wealth in the world. It is a gift, freely given. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; the gift is of God" (Ephesians 2:8). We do not buy it. We receive it.

**8:8-9** *We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? If she **is** a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver; and if she **is** a door, we will enclose her **with** a board of cedar.*

The scene shifts. "We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?" These seem to be the bride's brothers speaking, the ones who made her keep the vineyards (1:6), remembering when she was a little girl, not yet grown. They had a duty to protect her until the day she would be promised in marriage.

"If she is a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver; and if she is a door, we will enclose her with a board of cedar." Their plan was simple. If she proved to be like a wall, firm and pure, keeping herself from those who would take advantage of her, they would honor her and adorn her with silver. If she proved to be like a door, open to anyone who came along, they would board her up with cedar planks, guarding her closely. Either way, they would protect her purity.

Families have a responsibility to protect their young people and help them grow up pure. Parents, brothers, grandparents and churches all have a part. We honor those who stand firm, and we guard those who are vulnerable.

**8:10** *I **am** a wall, and my breasts **are** like the towers; then I was in his eyes like one who finds peace.*

"I am a wall, and my breasts are like the towers." The bride answers. She was a wall. She kept herself pure, and now she has grown into a woman. "Then I was in his eyes like one who finds peace." Because she kept herself, she came to her husband with nothing to hide, and she found peace and favor in his eyes. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom, which sounds like the names Solomon (Shelomoh) and Shulammite. She found shalom with Solomon.

This is a beautiful testimony. Purity before marriage led to peace in marriage. That does not mean those who failed can never find peace. Christ forgives. But it does mean that the choice to wait is never wasted. It brings a peace that nothing else can give.

**8:11-12** *A vineyard belonged to Solomon at Baal-hamon; he gave the vineyard to the keepers; each man would bring for its fruit a thousand **pieces of** silver. My vineyard, which **is** mine, **is** before me. The thousand **is** for you, Solomon, and two hundred for those who keep its fruit.*

"A vineyard belonged to Solomon at Baal-hamon; he gave the vineyard to the keepers; each man would bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver." Solomon owned a great vineyard, so large that he rented it out to tenants, and each one paid him a thousand pieces of silver. The location of Baal-hamon is unknown. The point is Solomon's great wealth.

"My vineyard, which is mine, is before me." The bride speaks. In 1:6 she said she had not kept her own vineyard. Now she has. Her vineyard is herself, her own person and love. She is not one of Solomon's possessions, rented out for profit. She gives herself freely. "The thousand is for you, Solomon, and two hundred for those who keep its fruit." She seems to say, you may have your great vineyard and its thousand pieces of silver, and the keepers may have their share. My vineyard I give to you myself, freely, out of love. That is worth more than any amount of silver (8:7).

**8:13-14** *You who dwell in the gardens, companions are listening for your voice; make me hear **it**. Flee, my beloved, and be for yourself like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of spices.*

"You who dwell in the gardens, companions are listening for your voice; make me hear it." The husband speaks. His wife is in the garden, and friends are near. He wants to hear her voice, as he did in 2:14. Love never tires of hearing the beloved.

"Flee, my beloved, and be for yourself like a gazelle or a fawn of the stags on the mountains of spices." The bride answers, and these are the last words of the Song. She calls him to come quickly, like a gazelle bounding over the mountains. The mountains are now "mountains of spices," not the mountains of separation of 2:17. The book ends not with a final scene but with longing, with love still alive and eager.

The Bible ends in a very similar way. In the last chapter of Revelation, "the Spirit and the bride say, Come" (Revelation 22:17). Jesus answers, "Yes, I am coming quickly," and the church replies, "Amen. Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). The Song ends with a bride longing for her beloved to come. The whole Bible ends with the church longing for her Bridegroom to return. Until He does, we wait, we watch, and we love Him with a love that many waters cannot quench.

## Summary

The bride wishes she could show her love for her husband openly and bring him to her mother's house. She rests in his embrace and, for the third time, charges the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until it pleases. The couple comes up from the wilderness, the bride leaning on her beloved. She asks him to set her as a seal on his heart and arm, because love is strong like death, its jealousy unyielding as Sheol, its flames a flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, and no fortune can buy it. Her brothers remember planning to protect their little sister, and she testifies that she was a wall, keeping herself pure, and so found peace in her husband's eyes. She contrasts Solomon's rented vineyard with her own, which she gives freely. The Song ends with the husband asking to hear her voice and the bride calling him to come quickly, like a gazelle on the mountains of spices.

## Study Questions

1. Why does the bride wish her husband were like a brother to her? (8:1-2)

2. How is the third refrain different from the first two, and what does it suggest about her experience? (8:4; 2:7; 3:5)

3. What picture of marriage do you see in the bride coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved? (8:5)

4. What was a seal, and what does the bride mean when she asks to be set as a seal on his heart and arm? (8:6)

5. In what ways is love strong like death? What does "a flame of the LORD" tell us about where love comes from? (8:6)

6. What can many waters not do, and what can money not buy? (8:7)

7. What did the brothers plan for their little sister, and what did the bride say about herself? (8:8-10)

8. How do verses 6 and 7 point us to the love of Christ for His people? (Romans 8:35-39)

9. How can you, your family and your church help young people be a wall and not a door?

10. The Song and the whole Bible end with a longing for the Beloved to come. How does the hope of Christ's return shape the way you love Him and others now? (Revelation 22:17, 20)

# Conclusion

Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are very different books, but they belong together. Ecclesiastes is the record of a king who had everything and tested it all: learning, laughter, wine, building, gardens, servants, silver and gold, music and many women. Again and again he came back with the same verdict: "Futility of futilities! Everything is futility" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Under the sun, the wise man dies like the fool, the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, and what we build is left to someone else. But all through the book the Preacher kept lifting his eyes. Our daily bread, our work and our joy come "from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24). God "has put eternity in their heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And at the end he gave us the answer to every question he had raised: "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Song of Songs takes up one of the best gifts God gives under the sun, the love of a husband and wife, and sings about it with joy. It shows us love that waits for its time, rejoices in the covenant of marriage, delights in the beloved, forgives after a hard night and grows stronger with the years. Three times the bride warns us not to awaken love until it pleases. And at the heart of the Song she tells us what true love is: "Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm, for love is strong like death," and "Many waters are not able to quench the love" (Song of Songs 8:6-7). Ecclesiastes warns us not to make any good thing into a god. Song of Songs shows us how to receive a good gift from God with thanks and keep it pure.

As I said at the start of this study, the guiding principle throughout has been to read God's Word plainly, as it is written, and let Scripture explain Scripture. Read that way, both books point beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. The Preacher could only see death from under the sun. Jesus came from above the sun, "abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). In Him our toil "is not empty in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). The Song shows a love strong like death. Jesus showed a love stronger than death, when He gave Himself for His bride, the church, and rose again (Ephesians 5:25). The Preacher asked what is good for man in his short life. The answer is a Person. Jesus said of Himself, "something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42).

I hope this study has done what I set out to do: bring you closer to God, help you grow in your walk with Him, and help you live wisely and love faithfully in the days He gives you. Life under the sun is a breath, but no one who belongs to Christ lives for nothing. Nothing can "separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

*Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness*

*for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God. Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.*

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, and find a church where you can grow in God's Word and serve, and remember the end of the matter: fear God and keep His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

# Bibliography

The following source was consulted throughout this study. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

Green, Jay P., Sr. (ed.). The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English. Hendrickson Publishers, 1986 (2nd ed.; printing used 2005). ISBN 1-56563-977-4.