

THE ORDERED SOUL SERIES

BOOK 10

# THE RESTLESS SOUL

*Ecclesiastes and the Weariness  
of Life Under the Sun*



VANITY  
FUTILITY  
TOIL  
PLEASURE  
WEALTH  
WISDOM  
TIME  
INJUSTICE  
DEATH

I COMMUNED WITH  
MINE OWN HEART,  
SAYING, LO, I AM  
COME TO GREAT  
ESTATE, AND HAVE  
GOTTEN MORE  
WISDOM THAN ALL  
THEY THAT HAVE BEEN  
BEFORE ME IN  
JERUSALEM.

ECCLESIASTES 2:7

I TRIED TO CHEER  
MINE HEART WITH  
WINE: YET WAS  
MY HEART WISER  
THAN TO RETAIN  
ITSELF BY REASON  
OF THIS, AND TO  
LAY HOLD ON FOLLY,  
TILL I MIGHT SEE  
WHAT WAS GOOD  
FOR THE SONS  
OF MEN TO DO  
UNDER HEAVEN.

ECCLESIASTES 2:3

VANITY OF VANITIES,  
SAITH THE PREACHER;  
VANITY OF VANITIES;  
ALL IS VANITY.

WHAT HATH MAN OF  
ALL HIS LABOUR WHICH  
HE TAKETH UNDER  
THE SUN?

THERE IS A TIME TO  
EVERY PURPOSE UNDER  
THE HEAVEN.

THE END OF THE MATTER;  
ALL IS HEARD.  
FEAR GOD, AND KEEP  
HIS COMMANDMENTS:  
FOR THIS IS THE WHOLE  
DUTY OF MAN.

ECCLESIASTES 12:13-14



ROBERT WILLOUGHBY



# THE RESTLESS SOUL

## Ecclesiastes and the Weariness of Life Under the Sun

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### **About *The Ordered Soul Series***

*The Ordered Soul Series* is a collection of Christian books exploring what it means to be truly human in a world that has become increasingly uncertain about the nature of the human person.

Each book examines a particular question facing the modern soul. Some explore identity, morality, conscience, grace, freedom, suffering, or the search for meaning. Others address the pressures created by contemporary culture and ask how the Christian understanding of humanity speaks into those challenges. Although the subjects differ, every volume is built upon the same conviction: that the deepest questions of human life cannot be answered rightly until we understand who man is before God.

The books are connected by a common vision, but they are not chapters in a single work. Each volume has been written as a complete book in its own right and may be read in whatever order best serves the reader's interests. Together they form a wider conversation about the recovery of the human soul through the truth of Scripture.

Throughout the series, the central concern is not simply the correction of ideas but the restoration of persons. The Bible presents humanity as created by God, disordered by sin, redeemed through Christ, and called into the fullness of life for which it was made. Every volume approaches that reality from a different perspective while remaining faithful to the same biblical foundation.

It is my hope that these books will do more than inform the mind. I hope they will encourage thoughtful reflection, honest self-examination, deeper confidence in Scripture, and above all, a renewed appreciation for the wisdom of God's design for human life.

Whether this is your first encounter with *The Ordered Soul Series* or one of several volumes you have read, my prayer is that these pages will help you see both yourself and your Creator more clearly.

**Robert Willoughby**

## The weariness we cannot explain

There is a weariness that sleep does not cure. It is not always the result of physical labour, illness, grief, or a season of unusual strain. Sometimes it appears in people whose lives are outwardly comfortable, whose needs are largely met, and whose days contain no obvious catastrophe. They wake tired of beginning again, move through their responsibilities without conviction, and reach the evening unable to say what all their activity has accomplished.

Modern life has developed many ways of relieving discomfort, yet it has not learned how to answer this deeper exhaustion. We can travel further, communicate faster, acquire more easily, and distract ourselves almost without interruption. Music, conversation, entertainment, opinion, outrage, news, and amusement are available whenever silence begins to approach. The restless soul is rarely left alone long enough to hear itself, but the noise that suppresses its questions cannot remove them.

Beneath much of our activity lies a fear that life may not be leading anywhere. We work because work must be done, maintain what must be maintained, solve one problem only to meet another, and watch yesterday's achievements become today's obligations. The house that was cleaned becomes untidy again. The money that was earned is spent. The meal that was prepared is consumed, and hunger returns. The body that was rested becomes tired, while the task that was completed is replaced by the next demand.

This repetition is not itself meaningless. Much of faithful living consists of doing again what love, duty, and stewardship require. The problem begins when repetition is all that the soul can see. When there is no larger purpose, the return of ordinary duties begins to feel less like faithfulness and more like entrapment.

Ecclesiastes speaks directly into that experience. It does not begin by reassuring the reader that everything will soon make sense. It does not offer an easy sequence of principles by which frustration can be converted into success. The Preacher looks steadily at the world, considers what men spend their lives pursuing, and refuses to exaggerate the power of any earthly thing.

He has seen labour, pleasure, wisdom, wealth, power, injustice, youth, ageing, companionship, solitude, reputation, and death. He has watched people build lives that appear impressive and then leave everything

behind. He has observed the wise and the foolish walking towards the same grave, while generations disappear and the world continues without them. His conclusions are unsettling because they address the very things upon which people commonly depend for identity and meaning.

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**Ecclesiastes 1:8**

All things are full of labor; man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

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The Preacher describes more than tired bodies. The eye continues to look because what it has already seen has not satisfied it. The ear continues to listen because what it has already heard has not filled it. Human desire moves onward, reaching towards the next experience, possession, achievement, explanation, or moment of recognition. Something is always expected to arrive that will finally quiet the inward demand.

This is one reason abundance has not delivered the peace it promised. Lack can certainly make life painful, and poverty should never be romanticised. Yet when basic needs have been met, the human appetite does not simply announce that it has enough. It often creates new requirements, new comparisons, and new reasons to feel deprived.

A person may once have longed for stable employment and later feel imprisoned by the job that gave him security. He may desire a home and, having obtained one, become preoccupied with improving, protecting, or replacing it. He may seek recognition, receive it, and discover that recognition must continually be renewed. Each arrival creates another horizon because no temporal achievement can permanently settle a soul that carries an eternal hunger.

Ecclesiastes calls this life “under the sun.” The phrase does not merely identify a geographical location or describe ordinary human existence. It names life as it appears when the visible world becomes the boundary of meaning. Under the sun, man is born, labours, loves, loses, ages, and dies. His years may differ greatly from those of another person, but neither can remain forever within the world he has tried to make his own.

When life is viewed only from within that boundary, its contradictions become severe. A person may act wisely and still suffer. Another may behave foolishly and prosper. Good work may go unnoticed, while shallow work attracts praise. The innocent may be oppressed, the corrupt

may gain influence, and those who have sacrificed much may leave this life with little evidence that their sacrifice mattered.

The Preacher does not deny these contradictions in order to defend a comforting religious picture. He allows them to stand. Faith that cannot look honestly at injustice, loss, failure, and death is too fragile to guide the soul through them.

There is a temptation to treat Ecclesiastes as a book of pessimism, as though its author has simply become embittered by disappointment. That interpretation does not go far enough. The Preacher's weariness does not arise because he tried one path and failed. He possesses the unusual authority of a man who has explored the promises of the world and discovered their limits from within.

He has not merely imagined pleasure; he has pursued it. He has not envied the achievements of others from a distance; he has built, planted, gathered, ruled, studied, and accumulated. His conclusion is not the resentment of a man excluded from life's rewards. It is the testimony of one who received much of what men desire and found that possession did not answer the question that desire had concealed.

The word vanity runs through Ecclesiastes, but it should not be reduced to the claim that everything is worthless. Work may accomplish real good. Wisdom may protect a person from many forms of folly. Companionship may comfort the lonely, money may meet genuine needs, and pleasure may bring legitimate delight. The book does not need to deny the value of these things in order to expose their limitations.

Vanity describes what is fleeting, elusive, and impossible to secure. It is like breath appearing in cold air before vanishing, or mist that can be seen but cannot be held. The things of life are real, yet they do not remain in our possession. We receive them for a time, but the hand that grasps them most tightly cannot prevent their passing.

The restless soul refuses this condition. It wants the temporary to become permanent, the uncertain to become controllable, and the created thing to provide an assurance it was never designed to give. It asks work to prove that a life mattered, pleasure to silence sorrow, wealth to prevent vulnerability, wisdom to explain every mystery, and human love to overcome death.

When these things fail, the soul often concludes that it needs more of them. It works harder, consumes more, searches longer, accumulates

further, and demands stronger forms of reassurance. What appears to be determination may actually be an inability to accept that the answer is not hidden at the far end of the same pursuit.

The criticism will arise that such thinking encourages resignation. If work cannot provide lasting meaning, why work diligently? If pleasure passes, why enjoy it? If wealth cannot secure life, why save or build? If death eventually removes everything, why care about anything within the reach of death?

Ecclesiastes does not answer by calling man away from life. It calls him away from the worship of life. There is a difference between receiving a created good and demanding that it become an ultimate good. The first allows gratitude; the second produces servitude.

Work becomes oppressive when it must justify the worker's existence. Pleasure becomes desperate when it must keep sorrow permanently away. Wealth becomes a master when it must guarantee a future that no person controls. Wisdom becomes pride when it is expected to explain what God has not disclosed.

The Preacher will eventually return us to ordinary things: eating, drinking, labouring, loving, giving, remembering, and rejoicing. He does not recover them by pretending that they last forever. He recovers them by placing them beneath God.

A meal need not be eternal in order to be received with thanks. Work need not outlive civilisation in order to be faithfully done. Love need not prevent death in order to be real. The passing nature of a gift does not make it worthless, but it does prevent us from treating it as God.

This is where the weariness of Ecclesiastes begins to reveal its mercy. The book removes false burdens from the things we have forced to carry them. It does not ask work to save us, pleasure to complete us, wealth to defend us, or wisdom to make us sovereign. It exposes these demands so that creation may be received according to its proper measure.

The soul becomes exhausted when it continually asks, "What can I gain from this, and how long can I keep it?" Every experience is then evaluated according to whether it enlarges the self, advances its position, protects its future, or relieves its discomfort. Even good things become heavy when they are forced into the service of self-preservation.

Ecclesiastes asks a more unsettling question: what remains when the self can no longer hold what it has gathered? That question leads eventually towards death, judgement, and the fear of God. Before reaching those conclusions, however, the book makes us walk through the places where we ordinarily look for an escape.

We will consider the repetition of daily life and the desire to achieve something that will remain. We will enter the worlds of pleasure, ambition, wealth, knowledge, rivalry, injustice, religion, ageing, and mortality. Each offers something genuine, yet each becomes destructive when asked to provide what lies beyond its nature.

This journey requires patience because the temptation will be to answer Ecclesiastes before we have allowed it to question us. We may hurry to say that God gives life meaning and therefore avoid examining the many practical ways in which we still seek meaning elsewhere. A correct conclusion can become a defence against honest recognition.

A person may confess that God is sufficient while living as though his worth depends entirely upon his work. He may declare that earthly treasure is temporary while measuring his security by what he owns. He may speak confidently about eternal life while being governed by the fear of ageing, obscurity, and death. Ecclesiastes reaches beneath stated belief and examines where the heart has actually placed its weight.

The book is therefore not only for those who openly doubt. It is also for those whose faith has become layered over an unexamined restlessness. Religious language may conceal the same ambitions, rivalries, appetites, and fears that govern the surrounding world. The soul may speak of God while still expecting life under the sun to give it a permanent home.

The Preacher will not permit that concealment. He keeps taking the things we trust and carrying them towards their end. He asks what becomes of pleasure when sensation fades, what becomes of achievement when another person inherits it, what becomes of reputation when a generation forgets, and what becomes of possession when the owner returns to dust.

These questions are not intended to destroy the desire to live. They are intended to free life from demands it cannot satisfy. When man ceases to demand permanence from what is passing, he becomes able to receive the present without trying to possess it forever.

The cure for restlessness is not withdrawal from the world, nor is it the discovery of some earthly experience intense enough to silence every



longing. It begins when the soul recognises the difference between the gift and the Giver. Created things may nourish, delight, instruct, and accompany us, but they cannot become the ground upon which eternity rests.

Life under the sun becomes unbearable when the sun is treated as the highest light there is. Ecclesiastes leads us through that enclosed world until its ceilings become visible and its promises have been tested. Only then can the soul understand why everything it grasps eventually passes through its hands.

The restless soul assumes that peace will come when it finally possesses enough. The Preacher begins from the opposite direction. Peace becomes possible when man stops demanding that what he possesses should make him whole.

## The endless return

The weariness described by Ecclesiastes begins with movement that does not seem to produce arrival. The world is active, but its activity appears circular. Generations enter and leave it, the sun crosses the sky and returns to begin again, the wind changes direction only to revisit its former course, and the rivers continue to flow into a sea that is never filled.

Nothing in this picture is still. The earth is full of motion, yet the Preacher looks upon that motion and asks what has finally been gained. His question is not whether anything happened, but whether all that happened brought man any closer to permanence.

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### **Ecclesiastes 1:3–7**

What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?  
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.

The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

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The question of profit is larger than a question about wages or material reward. It asks what remains after the labour has been completed and the labourer has gone. A person may spend decades building, maintaining, organising, correcting, and improving, but eventually his hands release everything they once held.

Others continue where he stopped. They may preserve his work, alter it, neglect it, or forget the name of the person who began it. The world receives another generation and continues moving.

There is something unsettling in the contrast between man and the earth beneath him. Human beings often experience their lives as central, yet the world existed before their arrival and remains after their departure. The place that once seemed shaped around their concerns absorbs their absence with remarkable ease.

A man may be indispensable within his household, workplace, church, or community. His days may be crowded with responsibilities that appear

unable to continue without him. Nevertheless, when he is gone, the necessary adjustments are made, another person takes his place, and the activities that once demanded his constant attention continue.

This does not mean that his life had no value. It means that the world cannot preserve his importance indefinitely. A person who depends upon being needed for his sense of worth will eventually confront the painful truth that no human being remains necessary forever.

The natural world reflects this without apology. The sun does not pause when a generation dies. The wind does not interrupt its course to acknowledge the passing of the powerful. Rivers continue towards the sea while the names of those who crossed them disappear from memory.

Ecclesiastes does not describe nature as cruel. It describes a created order that does not revolve around the individual human life. The restless soul struggles against this because it wants the world to confirm that its particular existence cannot be replaced.

Much of human striving can be understood as an attempt to resist disappearance. People want to leave a mark, build a legacy, establish a name, create something enduring, or become unforgettable to those who follow. Such desires are not always vain in the sense of being shallow. They may arise from the deeper and more troubling awareness that life is brief and memory is weak.

The Preacher sees how quickly one generation loses contact with another. Each generation enters a world shaped by people it barely remembers. It inherits buildings, customs, language, institutions, discoveries, wounds, and obligations, while knowing little about the lives through which these things came.

Even those remembered by history are rarely remembered as whole persons. They become names attached to events, achievements, failures, or ideas. Their ordinary fears, private loyalties, disappointments, acts of kindness, and moments of repentance pass beyond the reach of those who later speak about them.

The desire to be remembered cannot therefore bear the weight placed upon it. Memory itself is selective, unstable, and temporary. A person may succeed in extending his name beyond his lifetime and still be unable to control what that name will mean.



The endless return also appears within the ordinary pattern of daily life. The grandeur of the sun, wind, and rivers is reflected in smaller domestic repetitions. Beds are made and slept in again. Clothes are washed and dirtied again. Rooms are put in order and gradually fall out of order.

Bills are paid, supplies are replaced, bodies are fed, and problems that seemed settled return in another form. The repetitive nature of maintenance can become exhausting because maintenance rarely produces a final moment in which nothing more is required.

Many people imagine that peace lies beyond the completion of their present responsibilities. They tell themselves that they will rest when the project is finished, the debt is cleared, the children are older, the business is stable, the house is complete, or the difficult season has passed. When that point arrives, another responsibility has usually taken its place.

Life does contain periods of relief, but it does not normally produce the permanent clearing in which every demand disappears. The expectation of such a moment makes ordinary duty feel like an obstacle rather than the substance of much of human life.

The critical voice might answer that this is simply maturity. Adults understand that life consists of repeated tasks and continuing responsibilities. The demand that everything should lead towards some dramatic fulfilment may seem like the residue of childish expectation.

There is truth in that objection. A person must learn to perform necessary work without requiring constant excitement or recognition. Faithfulness often appears through repetition, and a life built only around novelty will become unstable.

Ecclesiastes is not complaining that life lacks sufficient entertainment. Its concern reaches further than boredom. The Preacher asks whether repetition possesses meaning when it is contained entirely within a world of birth, labour, decay, and death.

The question cannot be answered merely by advising people to become more disciplined. Discipline may help a person bear repetition, but it cannot explain what repetition is for. Endurance can carry a man along the road, but it cannot tell him where the road leads.

This distinction matters because the same outward life may be experienced in two very different ways. One person may perform a repeated duty as an act of love before God. Another may perform the

same duty while believing that nothing exists beyond the task and its temporary result.

The work itself may look identical, yet the soul inhabiting it is not the same. The first receives repetition as part of faithfulness; the second experiences it as evidence of entrapment.

Modern life often intensifies this sense of circularity while disguising it as progress. Technology changes, fashions move, products are replaced, and language continually announces that something new has arrived. Beneath the changing surface, the same desires remain active.

People continue seeking security, recognition, pleasure, belonging, control, and relief from death. New tools alter the manner in which these desires are pursued, but they do not transform the desires themselves.

A person may possess forms of convenience unavailable to previous generations and still ask the same ancient questions. Does my life matter? Will anything I have done remain? Why does satisfaction disappear so quickly? Why must every gain be defended against loss?

The promise of constant novelty can make repetition harder to bear. When people are trained to expect continual stimulation, ordinary life begins to feel defective. The quiet work of sustaining a household, developing a skill, caring for another person, keeping a promise, or remaining faithful through an uneventful season may seem insufficient because it does not continually announce itself as new.

The soul then begins to confuse intensity with meaning. It searches for stronger experiences because ordinary experience no longer feels capable of confirming that life is real. Yet intensity also fades, and the person is returned to the same inward restlessness with a higher threshold for distraction.

Ecclesiastes cuts through the illusion of novelty by observing that human nature remains remarkably consistent. The scenery changes, but pride, fear, rivalry, desire, grief, injustice, affection, and mortality continue. Every generation believes itself unusually advanced while repeating many of the errors it criticises in those before it.

This recognition can lead towards cynicism. If human beings continue repeating the same failures, perhaps hope is foolish. If every generation rises, struggles, and disappears, perhaps nothing truly matters.

The Preacher brings the reader close to that conclusion, but he does not finally remain there. He first removes the false hope that history itself will save humanity. Time does not automatically purify the human heart, and progress in knowledge does not guarantee progress in wisdom.

The world cannot be trusted to evolve beyond the need for repentance. New generations may inherit better instruments while carrying the same disordered loves. Greater power can enlarge human service, but it can also enlarge the reach of human corruption.

The endless return therefore reveals both human limitation and human dependence. Man does not stand outside the cycles he observes. He belongs to a generation that will pass, inhabits a body that requires continual care, and performs work that others will eventually inherit.

Restlessness increases when he treats these limits as personal insults. He resents repetition because it reminds him that he has not achieved final control. He resents maintenance because it shows that possession is never complete. He resents time because it carries him towards an ending he cannot postpone forever.

There is another way to inhabit repetition, but it can only emerge when the self is no longer expected to become sovereign. The repeated task may be received as today's portion rather than judged by whether it creates permanent significance. Faithfulness does not require that every act survive history. It requires that the act be rightly done within the time given for it.

A parent may repeat the same instruction many times, not because the earlier effort was worthless, but because love remains patient. A person may prepare another meal, offer another prayer, return to another day of work, or extend forgiveness again because goodness is not invalidated by the need to practise it repeatedly.

The natural cycles that trouble the Preacher can therefore be seen differently when they are placed within God's order. The rising sun does not merely repeat yesterday; it gives another day that man did not create. The returning seasons do not only announce decay; they reveal a world sustained beyond human power.

Ecclesiastes does not allow this recognition to become sentimental. Generations still pass, memory still fades, labour still tires the body, and death still approaches. Faith does not change these realities into illusions.

It changes the question by which they are judged. The value of a life is not finally determined by how long its visible effects remain, but by whether that life was lived before God.

The restless soul wants proof that its work will last. It wants the world to preserve evidence that it was here and that its struggle mattered. The Preacher offers no guarantee that history will provide such proof.

He directs us instead towards a God who sees what history forgets. Until that truth becomes the foundation of the soul, repetition will continue to feel like disappearance.

Life under the sun moves in circles because the visible world cannot lead beyond itself. The soul will remain weary while it expects those circles to produce eternity. Its first movement towards rest begins when it stops asking time to give what can only be received from the One who stands above time.



## The failure of pleasure

When repetition becomes oppressive, pleasure appears to offer an escape. It interrupts the ordinary, alters the mood, and gives the soul something towards which it can look forward. The difficult week is endured because the weekend is coming, the unwelcome duty is softened by the promised reward, and the disappointment of the present is answered by anticipation of the next enjoyable thing.

There is nothing inherently corrupt in this pattern. Human beings require rest, delight, celebration, affection, beauty, and laughter. A life from which every pleasure has been removed does not become holy merely because it has become severe.

The danger begins when pleasure is asked to do more than pleasure can accomplish. What was intended to brighten life becomes responsible for making life worth living. Enjoyment is no longer received as a gift within existence but pursued as an escape from existence itself.

The Preacher does not examine pleasure from a safe distance. He deliberately tests its promise, giving himself access to the forms of enjoyment that wealth, status, and freedom can provide. He does not merely imagine what a more pleasurable life might feel like; he removes many of the restraints that prevent other people from discovering it for themselves.

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### **Ecclesiastes 2:1–2**

I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth;  
therefore enjoy pleasure; and, behold, this also is vanity.  
I said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What doeth it?

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The question, “What doeth it?” is more searching than a judgement upon laughter. The Preacher is asking what pleasure finally accomplishes within the soul. It may produce delight, ease tension, create companionship, and offer temporary relief, but what remains when the experience has passed?

Pleasure is powerful in the moment because it narrows attention. The person eating, laughing, drinking, travelling, celebrating, purchasing, or being entertained is briefly drawn away from whatever has troubled him. The unanswered questions do not always disappear, but they become less audible.

This temporary silence can easily be mistaken for healing. A person may feel better without becoming better, and the distinction is often concealed by the strength of immediate relief. When the pleasure ends and the unease returns, he concludes that he needs another experience rather than asking why the first could not sustain him.

The cycle is familiar because pleasure produces memory and anticipation as well as enjoyment. The soul looks backwards to what once delighted it and forwards to the possibility of repeating the feeling. The present becomes a passage between remembered satisfaction and imagined satisfaction, while the person remains unable to inhabit the life directly before him.

The difficulty is not that pleasure gives too little. It is that desire learns quickly. What was once unusual becomes familiar, and familiarity reduces intensity. The soul then needs either more of the same experience or a new form of stimulation to recover the earlier effect.

A child may be overwhelmed with delight by something simple that an adult barely notices. The difference is not always that the adult has become wiser. He may simply have become accustomed to abundance and therefore less capable of receiving what is before him.

The inability to enjoy ordinary things is often mistaken for sophistication. The person who has experienced much may begin to regard simplicity as inadequacy. His tastes become more demanding, his standards narrow, and his capacity for surprise diminishes.

What he calls refinement may partly be exhaustion. He has consumed so many experiences that pleasure must now work harder to reach him. The world has not necessarily become less beautiful, but his appetite has become less responsive.

This is the hidden cost of continual stimulation. It does not merely fill the hours; it retracts desire. Silence becomes uncomfortable, slowness becomes intolerable, and any activity that does not immediately reward attention begins to feel empty.

A person may then reach for entertainment without consciously wanting it. He checks, watches, scrolls, listens, eats, purchases, or plans because an unoccupied moment exposes a restlessness he has not learned to face. Pleasure becomes less an expression of delight than a defence against inward stillness.

The critical voice may object that this treats enjoyment with unnecessary suspicion. Life is difficult, and many people carry responsibilities that offer little relief. Why should they be made to feel guilty for taking pleasure wherever they can find it?

That objection deserves to be heard because religion has sometimes spoken about pleasure as though misery were evidence of faithfulness. People have been taught to distrust laughter, beauty, bodily comfort, and celebration, as though God were honoured by their inability to enjoy what He created. Ecclesiastes does not require such a conclusion.

The Preacher's concern is not that pleasure feels good. His concern is that feeling good cannot answer the whole question of human existence. The person who receives enjoyment with gratitude is very different from the person who needs enjoyment to prevent his life from feeling meaningless.

The first can enjoy without clinging. The second becomes anxious as soon as pleasure begins to fade because its disappearance returns him to the emptiness from which he was trying to escape.

This distinction can be seen in the way people respond to the ending of a good experience. Gratitude allows a person to say that something was beautiful even though it has passed. Restlessness resents the passing because it regards the end of pleasure as the return of deprivation.

The holiday that was meant to restore becomes a source of sadness when ordinary life resumes. The gathering that brought joy is followed by a sharper awareness of loneliness. The purchase that created excitement becomes part of the background, and the mind turns towards the next object.

Nothing has necessarily gone wrong with the experience. It has simply reached the boundary that belongs to every temporal pleasure. The soul suffers because it expected the experience to carry it further than the experience was capable of going.

The Preacher's experiment is extensive. He gives himself to wine while retaining enough self-awareness to observe what happens. He builds houses, plants vineyards, creates gardens and orchards, gathers possessions, surrounds himself with music, and withholds no joy that his eyes desire.

This is not a picture of uncontrolled collapse. He is not merely intoxicated or reckless. His wisdom remains with him, allowing him to study pleasure while participating in it.

That detail makes his conclusion more difficult to dismiss. It would be easy to blame dissatisfaction upon foolish excess, poor judgement, or destructive appetite. The Preacher's problem is deeper because even cultivated and intelligently managed pleasure cannot give permanence to joy.

He can create beautiful surroundings but cannot prevent familiarity from settling over them. He can gather music but cannot make every song retain the force of its first hearing. He can satisfy the eyes without ending their capacity to desire something else.

Pleasure therefore reveals a division within the human person. The body may be satisfied while the soul remains unsettled. Appetite can be answered for a time, yet the person continues to seek an explanation for why he exists and what his life is becoming.

This is why the pursuit of pleasure often expands beyond its original boundaries. A person begins with something harmless and gradually asks it to carry more emotional weight. The activity that once refreshed him becomes necessary for coping, then necessary for feeling normal, and eventually difficult to refuse.

The problem may involve food, alcohol, travel, entertainment, shopping, sexual desire, social attention, or any other source of immediate reward. The particular pleasure differs, but the underlying movement remains similar. The person is no longer simply enjoying something good; he is using it to regulate a soul that has lost its centre.

Not every repeated pleasure becomes an addiction, and the language of addiction should not be applied carelessly. Nevertheless, dependence begins wherever a person believes he cannot bear himself without access to a particular relief.

This dependence can develop around respectable pleasures as easily as obviously destructive ones. A person may need continual social approval, professional praise, domestic comfort, intellectual excitement, or religious emotion. Because the object appears good, the bondage created around it may remain unrecognised.

The most dangerous pleasures are not always those that immediately damage the body. They may be the pleasures that allow the soul to avoid truth for the longest time. An apparently ordered life can still be organised around the constant prevention of discomfort.

The Preacher's question continues to press upon us: what does the pleasure do? Does it restore strength for faithful living, or does it make ordinary faithfulness harder to endure? Does it deepen gratitude, or create resentment when the experience cannot be repeated?

Does it enlarge love for others, or make them useful only when they contribute to our enjoyment? These questions do not condemn pleasure; they reveal the position it occupies within the soul.

Pleasure becomes especially unstable when it is joined to comparison. A person may be content with an experience until he sees that another person has enjoyed something greater. His pleasure is then measured not by its own goodness but by its position within an imagined hierarchy.

The meal was enjoyable until another meal looked more impressive. The home was comfortable until a larger home was seen. The journey was memorable until someone else travelled further.

Comparison does not merely create envy; it removes the ability to receive. The soul becomes a spectator of other lives and loses contact with the gifts present within its own. Pleasure must then provide not only enjoyment but proof of status.

This makes satisfaction almost impossible because another person can always possess, experience, or display something more. The restless soul is no longer asking whether a thing is good. It is asking whether the thing confirms that its life is sufficiently significant.

The desire for recognition can therefore enter even the most personal pleasures. People may find themselves presenting an experience while they are still having it, shaping the moment for an imagined audience. The memory is being manufactured before the event has been fully lived.

Such presentation does not always arise from vanity. It may express a desire to share beauty or remain connected with others. Yet it can also reveal uncertainty about whether an experience is real unless it is seen, approved, or envied.

Pleasure then loses its intimacy. The person becomes both participant and observer, judging how the moment appears while attempting to enjoy it.



He has difficulty receiving the experience because part of him remains outside it, asking what it says about him.

Ecclesiastes strips away this performance by bringing pleasure to its conclusion. The gardens, houses, songs, possessions, and celebrations were real. They produced genuine enjoyment, and the Preacher does not deny that his heart rejoiced in his labour.

Yet when he looked back upon the whole experiment, he found that enjoyment had been his portion rather than his answer. It belonged to the labour and the moment, but it could not give final profit to the life that contained them.

This distinction is essential. Pleasure may be the portion of an experience without becoming the purpose of existence. The meal can satisfy hunger, the song can stir the heart, and laughter can lighten a burden without being required to justify life itself.

The restless soul resists this modest place for pleasure because it wants more than a portion. It wants an experience that will settle desire permanently. When none can do so, it moves from one promise to another and accuses life of withholding the satisfaction that created things were never able to give.

Some people respond by increasing the intensity of pleasure. Others become cynical and declare that nothing is enjoyable. These reactions appear opposite, but both may arise from the same disappointed expectation.

The first continues to believe that a sufficiently powerful experience will finally overcome emptiness. The second concludes that pleasure is fraudulent because it failed to become permanent. Neither has yet learned to receive enjoyment without demanding salvation from it.

Ecclesiastes prepares the way for a more mature joy. Such joy does not deny sorrow, postpone mortality, or require the world to remain unchanged. It receives what is good while acknowledging that the gift is passing.

This kind of enjoyment is quieter than appetite because it does not need to seize the moment. It is capable of gratitude before possession and gratitude after release. The person may deeply value what has been given without pretending that he can keep it beyond its appointed time.

Pleasure becomes dangerous when it closes the soul against God, but it becomes holy when it is received from His hand. The difference does not lie merely in the object enjoyed. It lies in whether the person treats enjoyment as an entitlement, an escape, or a gift.

An entitled pleasure says that life owes me satisfaction. An escaping pleasure says that I must not be allowed to feel pain. A received pleasure says that this good thing has been given for a time, and I may enjoy it without asking it to become eternal.

The Preacher's disappointment therefore clears the ground for gratitude. He discovers that pleasure cannot support the whole weight of life, but that discovery does not require him to reject delight. It allows delight to return to its proper size.

The soul does not find rest by becoming incapable of enjoyment. It finds rest when enjoyment is no longer forced to defend it against every sorrow. Pleasure can then be welcomed without being worshipped and released without leaving the person spiritually destitute.

Life under the sun offers many real delights, but every one of them carries an ending within it. The restless soul sees that ending as a failure. The grateful soul receives the pleasure as evidence that something good was given, even though it could not be kept.

The failure of pleasure is therefore not that it gives nothing. Its failure appears when it is asked to give everything. It can brighten the road, but it cannot decide where the road leads.

## The burden of achievement

Pleasure promises relief from the weight of life, but achievement offers something more enduring. It tells a person that he can build, accomplish, organise, influence, and leave behind evidence that his years were not wasted. Where pleasure speaks to appetite, achievement speaks to identity.

Work has a rightful place within human life. Through it, needs are met, gifts are exercised, families are supported, communities are strengthened, and neglected parts of the world are brought into order. There is dignity in making something useful, solving a difficult problem, keeping a promise, or carrying a responsibility that others depend upon.

Yet work can quietly become responsible for answering questions it was never meant to settle. A person may no longer labour simply because the work is necessary or good. He may need achievement to prove that he is necessary and good.

This need is often praised because it produces visible results. The person arrives early, remains late, accepts difficult assignments, and gives unusual energy to whatever he undertakes. Others may see discipline, ambition, or dedication, while beneath the activity he may be trying to escape the fear that without accomplishment there is little within him worth seeing.

Achievement can become a form of self-construction. Each success adds another piece to the identity a person is building, while every failure threatens to expose its instability. He does not merely complete work; he uses completed work to create a version of himself that feels more secure.

The Preacher understands the attraction of this path because he has not lived idly. His dissatisfaction with pleasure does not lead him towards inactivity. He turns his attention towards what his hands have made and considers whether achievement can provide the lasting profit that enjoyment could not give.

The work is real, substantial, and impressive. Houses have been built, vineyards planted, gardens established, water systems created, wealth gathered, and an entire ordered life constructed through intelligence and effort. The Preacher is not examining the disappointment of a man who never fulfilled his potential. He is looking at the results of fulfilled ambition.

The problem appears when he considers what will happen to everything after him.

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**Ecclesiastes 2:18–23**

Yea, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun,  
because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.  
And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet  
shall he have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored, and  
wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. This is also  
vanity.  
Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the  
labor which I took under the sun.  
For there is a man whose labor is in wisdom, and in knowledge,  
and in equity; yet to a man that hath not labored therein shall he  
leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.  
For what hath man of all his labor, and of the vexation of his  
heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun?  
For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart  
taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

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The Preacher does not say that his work was badly done. His despair arises precisely because it was done with wisdom, knowledge, and care. He has invested himself in what he built, yet the future of it will eventually lie in hands he cannot govern.

The inheritor may be wise, preserving and developing what has been received. He may also be foolish, consuming in a short time what required years to establish. The one who laboured cannot decide which kind of man will follow him.

This loss of control touches one of the deepest ambitions hidden within achievement. People do not only want to produce something valuable. They want to secure its value against the future.

A founder may imagine that an organisation will continue according to the principles with which it began. A parent may hope that what has been built for the family will be treated with gratitude. A writer may want his words to be understood as he intended, while a leader may expect successors to preserve the culture he established.

These hopes are natural, and careful preparation for those who follow is part of faithful stewardship. Nevertheless, no generation can permanently control the next. What is inherited will be interpreted, altered, divided, neglected, or used for purposes the original labourer never imagined.

The pain of this truth increases when a person has given more to his work than the work had the right to receive. If achievement has become the container of his identity, the possibility that another person may misuse it feels like the destruction of the self.

He has placed years of thought, sacrifice, discipline, and emotional energy into something that cannot love him in return. When the work passes into other hands, it reveals that the bond between the labourer and his creation was never equal. He belonged to it more deeply than it belonged to him.

This is why people can struggle so intensely when they retire, sell a business, leave a position, or watch a responsibility pass to someone else. The outward change may be expected, yet the inward separation exposes how completely a role had become fused with identity.

A person who has long answered the question “Who are you?” by describing what he does may discover that the loss of occupation leaves him without language for himself. His skills remain, his history remains, and his character may remain, but the structure through which he recognised his worth has been removed.

Work can therefore create a strange form of dependence. The more capable a person becomes, the more others rely upon him. The more they rely upon him, the more necessary he feels. That necessity then becomes difficult to release because it protects him from the fear of insignificance.

He may continue carrying responsibilities that should be shared, refuse to train others properly, or become threatened by the competence of those around him. What appears to be commitment may partly be an unwillingness to discover that the work can continue without him.

The Preacher’s question cuts through this illusion. The man who comes afterwards will have rule over what another has built. Whether that successor succeeds or fails, the original labourer will no longer possess the authority he once exercised.

This does not diminish the importance of good succession. It reveals the limit within which succession takes place. A person may prepare the future, but he cannot inhabit it.

The desire to leave a legacy grows from this same confrontation with mortality. Legacy appears to offer a way for human beings to continue



beyond the reach of death. A name, institution, family, body of work, or lasting contribution can seem to preserve the person who created it.

There is honour in wanting one's life to benefit those who follow. The danger lies in using future remembrance as a substitute for eternal life. No legacy can preserve the whole person, and no human memory remains secure forever.

Even celebrated achievements are reduced by time. The complexity of a life becomes a sentence, a title, a plaque, a story, or a name attached to something the dead person can no longer direct. Later generations may admire the achievement while understanding little of the person who produced it.

Others disappear almost entirely from public memory, despite lives of genuine sacrifice and faithfulness. They raised children, sustained households, cared for the sick, repaired what was broken, served without recognition, and died without leaving anything that history would call significant.

If visible remembrance were the measure of human worth, such lives would appear small. Ecclesiastes gradually exposes why history cannot be trusted with the final judgement of a person.

History notices scale, novelty, conflict, power, and public consequence. God sees motive, fidelity, mercy, obedience, hidden endurance, and the use made of what was actually given. These are not the same measures.

The person driven by achievement often claims that he is only trying to make the best use of his abilities. That may be true, but the soul must still ask what happens when its abilities no longer produce admiration or control. A gift can be faithfully exercised without becoming the basis of self-worth.

The critical voice will insist that civilisation depends upon ambition. Houses are built, diseases studied, businesses formed, discoveries made, and institutions protected because some people refuse to be satisfied with what already exists. Would the removal of ambition not lead to laziness, mediocrity, and decline?

Ecclesiastes does not call for indifference towards the quality of work. The Preacher himself values wisdom above folly and recognises the difference between skill and carelessness. The correction is not aimed at excellence but at worship.

Excellence asks what the work requires and offers the best that can rightly be given. Worship asks the work to return identity, security, permanence, and justification. The first can rest when the work is complete; the second remains inwardly occupied even when the body has left the place of labour.

The final verse of the quoted passage reveals this inability to rest. The man's days contain sorrow and grief, but his labour follows him into the night. His body may lie down while his mind continues organising, forecasting, correcting, anticipating, and defending.

This condition is familiar to anyone who has finished the working day without being able to leave the work behind. The unresolved conversation is repeated, tomorrow's danger is rehearsed, and possible failures are examined from every direction. The person has ceased working outwardly, but the machinery of achievement continues to operate within him.

Such wakefulness may arise from real responsibility. Decisions have consequences, others depend upon the outcome, and careless leadership can cause genuine harm. Yet responsibility becomes distorted when a person assumes inward ownership of things that are beyond his authority.

He may act as though sufficient thought can eliminate uncertainty, sufficient effort can prevent every failure, or sufficient vigilance can protect everything he has built. The sleepless mind is often trying to exercise control over a future it has not been given.

Work then becomes a place where human limitation is continually resisted. The person cannot know every consequence, prepare for every change, or ensure the wisdom of everyone who will follow. His refusal to accept those boundaries does not enlarge his authority; it only enlarges his anxiety.

The Preacher reaches despair because he has made labour carry the hope of permanence. The work cannot bear it. What he built may remain for a time, but he cannot bind its future to his intentions.

The answer is not to work carelessly. It is to surrender the demand that work should make its creator immortal.

This surrender changes the meaning of achievement. The person may still build, lead, write, teach, cultivate, repair, organise, or create, but he no

longer needs the result to establish his right to exist. His work becomes an offering rather than a monument to himself.

An offering can be given because its final destination rests with God. A monument must be defended because it exists to preserve the person who raised it. One releases the work after faithfulness has been given; the other remains chained to the work through fear of being forgotten.

This distinction also changes the experience of failure. When identity depends upon achievement, failure becomes more than an unfavourable result. It becomes a verdict upon the person.

He may be unable to examine mistakes honestly because the admission of error threatens the structure through which he feels valuable. He protects the appearance of competence, shifts blame, or keeps pursuing a lost course because changing direction would require him to acknowledge that his judgement was not sovereign.

Work received as stewardship allows a more truthful response. The steward is responsible for faithfulness, care, learning, and obedience, but he is not required to pretend that every undertaking will prosper. He can admit failure without concluding that his personhood has failed.

Success can also be received more safely. It need not be denied or disguised beneath false humility. Good work may be recognised, celebrated, and enjoyed, but the person understands that ability, opportunity, health, support, timing, and countless conditions beyond his control contributed to the result.

Achievement loses its power to intoxicate when it is no longer regarded as self-creation. The worker did not give himself every capacity he possesses, nor did he establish all the circumstances that allowed those capacities to bear fruit.

This recognition does not weaken effort. It frees effort from desperation. A person can apply himself fully without asking the outcome to save him from insignificance.

There will still be seasons of demanding labour. Faithfulness may require sacrifice, concentration, and the endurance of discomfort. The difference is that work no longer claims every part of the person simply because the task is important.

A person may serve the work without becoming its possession. He may care deeply about the result while accepting that God has not placed the

whole future within his hands. He can prepare what will be inherited, teach those who follow, and then release what he cannot accompany beyond his own time.

The Preacher's despair uncovers the grief of a man who has confused control with meaning. He believed that what his hands had built should remain answerable to him. Death reveals that no earthly work can make such a promise.

The correction is severe, but it is also merciful. If the value of labour depended upon its permanent preservation, almost every human effort would finally be defeated. Time would eventually undo what neglect, foolishness, or disaster had not already removed.

Work has meaning because it is performed before God, not because it survives every future generation. The hidden act, the forgotten sacrifice, and the contribution absorbed into a larger good are not lost merely because history does not preserve the name attached to them.

The restless soul wants to complete something that will make rest possible. It imagines a final achievement beyond which nothing will remain uncertain and no further proof will be required. Such an achievement does not exist under the sun.

Rest begins when work is returned to its rightful place. It is part of the life entrusted to us, sometimes satisfying and sometimes grievous, capable of producing real good but incapable of carrying eternity.

The person who understands this may still labour with great seriousness. He simply no longer asks his labour to tell him whether his life was worth living.

What is built will one day pass to another. What is praised may be forgotten, and what is carefully protected may be changed. The worker cannot prevent these things, but he can decide whether the years given to him will be governed by fear of disappearance or by faithfulness to God.

Achievement cannot preserve the self. It can only reveal what the self chose to serve while strength and opportunity remained.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **A TIME BEYOND OUR CONTROL**

#### **The Soul Beneath the Seasons**

Human beings do not merely live in time. They resist it. We welcome the seasons that enlarge life and struggle against those that diminish it, wanting growth without decline, gathering without separation, healing without injury, and beginnings without endings.

Ecclesiastes does not present time as something man controls. The Preacher sees life moving through appointed seasons, many of which arrive without permission. A person may prepare, plan, and act wisely, but he cannot determine every moment in which gain, loss, laughter, grief, birth, or death will enter his life.

This lack of control is one of the deepest sources of restlessness. We are able to influence many circumstances, yet influence is not sovereignty. The soul becomes anxious when it mistakes careful preparation for the power to secure the future.

The familiar words of Ecclesiastes about a time for every purpose are sometimes treated as a gentle poem about the variety of life. They are more demanding than that. They tell us that existence includes experiences we would never choose and cannot indefinitely avoid.

There is a time to build, but also a time when what has been built must be surrendered. There is a time to embrace, but also a time when distance cannot be prevented. There is a time to speak, yet wisdom may later require silence. The season that once called for perseverance may eventually call for release.

The difficulty lies in recognising when the time has changed. Human beings often remain emotionally attached to a season after it has passed. They attempt to preserve a role, relationship, strength, or certainty that belonged to an earlier part of life.

What was once faithful can become fearful when it is continued only because change feels unbearable. A person may cling to an identity that no longer fits his responsibilities, or judge the present by whether it can recreate what has already gone.

Memory can deepen this resistance. The past becomes smoother in recollection, stripped of many of the tensions that were present while it



was being lived. The soul then compares the complexity of today with an edited version of yesterday and concludes that something essential has been lost.

Some things have been lost, and Ecclesiastes does not require us to deny grief. There are seasons whose passing leaves a wound. The mistake is not mourning what has ended, but believing that life can only possess meaning if the former season returns.

Time reveals that much of what we call possession is temporary stewardship. Health, strength, opportunity, influence, companionship, and independence are held within conditions we did not establish. We may care for them, but we cannot command them to remain.

This truth is difficult because the human heart reaches beyond the limits of the present moment. We do not merely experience one season at a time; we imagine the whole of life and ask how its parts belong together. We want to know why a particular loss was permitted and what purpose will finally emerge from it.

### **Ecclesiastes 3:11**

He hath made everything beautiful in his time; also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

The verse holds together two truths that the soul would prefer to separate. God is at work within time, yet man cannot see that work from beginning to end. We sense that life belongs to a larger order, but we are not given the position from which the whole order becomes visible.

This creates a painful tension. The heart desires coherence while the mind encounters fragments. We see the beginning of some things and the ending of others, but rarely understand the full relationship between them.

Faith is often tested within this gap. It is comparatively easy to trust a pattern once its purpose has become clear. The harder work is to remain faithful while the present season still appears unfinished, misplaced, or severe.

The critical voice may object that acceptance is merely another name for helplessness. If people are told that every season belongs to God, they may tolerate circumstances that should be challenged. Injustice, cruelty, neglect, and avoidable suffering could be defended as though they were simply appointed times.

Ecclesiastes does not remove moral responsibility. A time to act may require courage, resistance, repentance, or intervention. Recognising that we do not control history is not the same as refusing to obey within it.

The distinction lies between responsibility and mastery. We are responsible for what faithfulness requires now. We are not masters of every consequence that follows.

A person may speak truth and still be rejected. He may act wisely and still suffer loss. He may care faithfully for another and remain unable to prevent decline. Obedience does not guarantee control over the season in which obedience takes place.

Restlessness grows when the soul believes that right action must always produce the result it desires. It then judges faithfulness by outcome rather than by truth. When events remain painful, the person assumes that either God has failed or he has not yet found the correct method of control.

Ecclesiastes offers no such method. It teaches man to live within time without pretending to stand above it.

This humility does not make life passive. It makes action more honest. We plan while knowing that plans may change, love while knowing that separation will come, and build while knowing that what is built cannot remain untouched by time.

The soul may grieve these limits without treating them as evidence that life has no meaning. Finitude is not the same as futility. A season can be good without being permanent, and an act can be faithful without determining the whole future.

There is relief in accepting this, though the relief is not immediate comfort. Much anxiety is created by inwardly rehearsing futures over which we possess no authority. The mind attempts to live tomorrow before tomorrow has arrived, believing that enough anticipation will protect it from surprise.

Preparation has value, but imagined control does not. The person who tries to carry every future season at once becomes unable to receive the one actually given.

Ecclesiastes returns the soul to its proper scale. Man cannot see from the beginning to the end, but God can. Man inhabits the season; God holds the whole.

This does not explain every sorrow. It establishes the position from which sorrow may be endured without becoming ultimate. The present moment is real, but it is not the whole of reality.

The restless soul demands to know how everything will fit before it agrees to trust. The ordered soul acts faithfully within what has been revealed and leaves the unseen shape of time with God.

There will remain a time to gain and a time to lose, a time to speak and a time to be silent, a time to begin and a time to release. Peace does not come from arranging life so that only the preferred seasons remain.

It begins when man accepts that he is a creature within time and entrusts the meaning of the whole to the One who is not confined by it.

## A time beyond our control

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It begins when man accepts that he is a creature within time and entrusts the meaning of the whole to the One who is not confined by it.

## The world that is not fair

Not all restlessness arises from disappointed ambition or uncontrolled desire. Sometimes the soul is troubled because it sees clearly that the world is not as it should be. Innocent people suffer, power protects itself, and those who cause harm may continue without consequence.

Ecclesiastes does not explain this suffering away. The Preacher looks directly at oppression and notices not only the tears of those who are wounded, but the absence of anyone willing or able to comfort them.

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### **Ecclesiastes 4:1**

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

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The repeated words “no comforter” expose more than the cruelty of the oppressor. They reveal the loneliness of suffering that is unseen, disbelieved, or considered too inconvenient to confront. Pain becomes heavier when those around it remain silent.

Power does not always appear violent. It may operate through status, money, authority, reputation, family position, or control over what others are permitted to say. The powerful person may shape the account of what happened before the injured person has found the strength to speak.

This is why appeals to patience can sometimes become another form of oppression. The wounded are told not to become bitter, not to disturb the peace, and not to judge, while little is required of the one who caused the wound. Religious language may then protect the appearance of harmony at the expense of truth.

Ecclesiastes gives no permission for such avoidance. The Preacher does not begin by questioning whether the tears are excessive. He sees that power stands with the oppressor and that comfort has failed to reach the oppressed.

The soul’s demand for justice is not necessarily evidence of pride. Human beings recognise that actions ought to possess moral weight. When cruelty and goodness appear to receive the same outcome, something within us protests.

That protest reveals that we do not truly believe morality is a human invention. If right and wrong were merely private preferences, injustice could disappoint us but could not finally offend us. We are disturbed because we sense that evil violates an order greater than the will of the person committing it.

Yet the desire for justice can become corrupted. A wounded person may begin by wanting truth acknowledged and end by wanting the offender destroyed. Pain can sharpen moral sight, but it can also narrow it until the sufferer sees himself as incapable of wrongdoing.

Ecclesiastes therefore places oppression beside envy and rivalry. The world contains real victims, but it also contains people who interpret another person's success as a personal injury. Not every inequality is oppression, and not every disappointment proves that injustice has occurred.

Much labour is driven by comparison. A person sees what another has achieved and is no longer able to receive his own portion with peace. He works not because the task is good, but because another person's position has made his own feel intolerable.

Envy differs from the hunger for justice because envy does not primarily ask whether something is right. It asks why another person possesses what the self desires. It may disguise itself as moral criticism, finding faults in the successful person so that resentment can appear principled.

This does not mean that every criticism of success is envy. Wealth may be gained through exploitation, authority may be abused, and public admiration may belong to people of poor character. Wisdom requires the ability to distinguish genuine injustice from wounded comparison.

The critical voice may ask why a book about restlessness should linger over injustice when it cannot offer immediate correction. Would it not be kinder to turn quickly towards God's judgement and assure the sufferer that everything will eventually be made right?

Such assurance is true, but truth can be used at the wrong moment. A promise of future justice must not become a reason to avoid present responsibility. The person who believes that God sees oppression should become more willing, not less willing, to stand beside those who have no comforter.

Comfort does not always mean that the situation can be repaired. Some losses cannot be restored, and some public judgements will never acknowledge the truth. Comfort begins when the injured person is no longer required to carry both the wound and the denial that the wound exists.

This chapter cannot resolve the problem of evil, nor does Ecclesiastes attempt to do so. It allows the contradiction to remain visible: power may belong to the wrong person, and goodness may suffer without earthly reward.

The restless soul wants justice to be immediate because delay feels like indifference. When judgement does not come, faith may begin to weaken. The person wonders whether God sees, whether goodness matters, and whether restraint has been foolish.

Ecclesiastes will eventually bring every hidden thing before divine judgement. Before reaching that conclusion, it teaches us not to confuse delay with moral emptiness. The fact that justice has not yet appeared does not mean that right and wrong have become equal.

Meanwhile, human companionship becomes one of God's provisions within an unjust world. Another person cannot always remove the burden, but he can refuse to let the sufferer carry it alone. The presence of a truthful witness is itself a form of resistance against the isolation oppression creates.

The soul is not healed by pretending that the world is fair. It begins to steady when evil is named truthfully, envy is distinguished from justice, and suffering is met by faithful presence rather than convenient explanation.

Life under the sun contains tears that history never records and wrongs that earthly courts never settle. Their invisibility to the world does not make them invisible to God.

## The religion of many words

Restlessness does not disappear simply because a person enters a place of worship. The same desire for control that governs work, pleasure, and ambition can follow the soul into prayer. Religion may then become another method by which man attempts to secure the outcome he wants.

The Preacher approaches worship through reverence rather than self-expression. He warns the person entering the house of God to pay attention to his steps, his speech, and the condition of his heart.

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### **Ecclesiastes 5:1–2**

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools; for they consider not that they do evil.

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few.

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The command to keep one's foot suggests that worship should not be entered carelessly. Man is approaching God, not merely participating in a familiar religious activity. The danger of familiarity is that sacred things can become ordinary before the soul has noticed the change.

Words may continue, prayers may be spoken, and ceremonies may be observed while reverence has slowly disappeared. The person knows how worship should sound, but he no longer stands inwardly before the One to whom the words are addressed.

Ecclesiastes places hearing before sacrifice. This order matters because the restless soul prefers activity. It would rather perform, promise, explain, or offer something than become still enough to receive correction.

Listening requires surrender. The person who listens admits that he does not already possess everything he needs to know. He allows God's word to question the desires he brought into worship rather than using worship to strengthen them.

Many words can conceal this unwillingness. A person may speak at length because silence exposes the distance between what he says and what he actually wants. Religious language then becomes a covering over fear, resentment, ambition, or unbelief.

The warning does not condemn earnest prayer. Scripture contains grief, confession, pleading, thanksgiving, protest, and sustained petition. God does not require His children to approach Him with emotional emptiness.

The issue is not the number of words alone, but the belief that words give man leverage over God. The heart becomes hasty when it speaks before it has accepted who God is and who the worshipper is.

“For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth” restores the order that restlessness continually resists. God is not an extension of human desire. He is not summoned to approve the plan that the soul has already made or required to explain Himself according to the limits of human understanding.

This distinction becomes especially important in seasons of suffering. A person may pray sincerely for relief and rightly ask God to act. Yet petition can gradually become accusation when the desired answer does not arrive.

The soul begins to reason that faithfulness should place God under obligation. Because it has prayed, served, sacrificed, or believed, it expects a particular result. When the result is withheld, worship turns into a dispute over what God supposedly owes.

Such bargaining may be obvious, but it often appears in respectable forms. A person promises greater obedience if a crisis is removed, assumes that generosity should protect him from loss, or treats religious service as an investment that must eventually produce visible favour.

The Preacher later warns against careless vows because spoken devotion can exceed surrendered devotion. In a moment of fear or enthusiasm, a person may promise what he has not seriously considered. The words create the appearance of commitment before the cost of commitment has been accepted.

Reverence makes speech more truthful. It does not silence the heart, but it removes exaggeration. The worshipper no longer needs to impress God with intensity or persuade others that his faith is stronger than it is.

The critical voice may object that this emphasis produces a distant God. If man must continually remember that God is in heaven while he is upon earth, does prayer not become cold and fearful?

Reverence and intimacy are not enemies. Intimacy without reverence turns God into a companion who exists to affirm us. Reverence without



intimacy reduces worship to terrified formality. Biblical faith holds both together because the God who draws near remains God.

The restless soul wants closeness without surrender. It desires comfort from God while resisting His authority, and reassurance without the possibility of correction. Listening disrupts this arrangement because God may address something other than the problem the person wants solved.

He may expose pride where the person expected vindication, call for patience where immediate action was demanded, or require repentance before circumstances change. The worshipper who is only prepared to speak will miss what God is saying.

Ecclesiastes therefore offers a necessary discipline: approach carefully, listen readily, and speak truthfully. This is not a formula for obtaining an answer. It is the posture of a creature before his Creator.

Rest begins to enter worship when the person no longer needs prayer to secure control. He can ask boldly while accepting that God remains free, speak honestly without pretence, and remain silent without fearing that silence means abandonment.

The religion of many words exhausts the soul because it must continually maintain an appearance. Reverence releases that burden. Man may come before God without performance, but he cannot come without humility.

The soul does not need to fill the distance between earth and heaven with noise. It needs to remember that God has already spoken and become ready to hear.

## The hunger of possession

Money appears to offer protection against uncertainty. It can provide shelter, food, treatment, freedom of movement, and relief from many forms of immediate anxiety. To dismiss these benefits would be dishonest, especially for those who have experienced genuine poverty.

Ecclesiastes does not condemn possession merely because one person has more than another. Its concern is with the hunger that possession awakens and the false security built upon abundance. Wealth can solve particular problems while creating the illusion that vulnerability itself has been overcome.

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### **Ecclesiastes 5:10–12**

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase; this is also vanity.

When goods increase, they are increased that eat them; and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?

The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

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The problem begins not with silver, but with the love of silver. Desire does not announce in advance how much will be enough. It promises contentment at the next level, then quietly moves the boundary once that level has been reached.

A person may originally seek money because he wants freedom from fear. When security improves, however, the mind often discovers new dangers. There is now more to maintain, protect, insure, invest, and preserve.

The possession that promised peace begins to demand vigilance. Markets may fall, property may deteriorate, businesses may fail, and those who depend upon the wealth may increase. Abundance enlarges capacity, but it can also enlarge the number of possible losses.

This helps explain why people with considerable resources may still feel financially unsafe. Their fear is no longer measured by immediate need but by the distance between what they possess and what they believe they must preserve. Enough becomes difficult to define because the standard is continually adjusted by comparison, expectation, and imagined disaster.

The Preacher observes that when goods increase, those who consume them increase as well. Wealth rarely remains a private possession. It

draws obligations, employees, dependants, advisers, requests, and expectations around itself.

The owner may enjoy greater comfort, but much of what he possesses can only be observed, administered, or transferred. Beyond a certain point, accumulation enlarges ownership more readily than enjoyment.

This distinction is central to Ecclesiastes. The ability to possess something is not the same as the ability to receive it with gratitude. A person may hold much while experiencing little contentment, whereas another may possess less and remain capable of delight.

Enjoyment cannot simply be purchased alongside the object. The restless soul assumes that satisfaction resides within the possession and will therefore arrive automatically once ownership is secured. When it does not arrive, the possession is blamed for being insufficient and another is sought.

Wealth also promises independence. Money allows a person to avoid many forms of dependence upon others, which may be useful and dignifying. Yet complete independence is neither possible nor desirable.

No amount of wealth removes dependence upon the body, time, other people, the stability of society, or the continued mercy of God. A rich man may command many services while remaining unable to command another day of life.

The critical voice may object that warnings about wealth are easier to give when one's own needs are met. Those who lack money know that it matters profoundly. Financial hardship strains marriages, restricts choices, exposes people to danger, and can turn a small problem into a crisis.

This is true, and Ecclesiastes should never be used to make deprivation sound spiritually superior. Poverty is not automatically contentment, nor is anxiety about meeting real obligations evidence of greed. Money has genuine practical power, and responsible provision is part of faithful life.

The warning concerns the point at which provision becomes a search for invulnerability. A person may tell himself that he is merely being prudent while inwardly believing that one more reserve, property, investment, or source of income will finally place him beyond fear.

That point never arrives because money cannot protect against every form of loss. It may improve the treatment of illness but cannot make the body

immortal. It may provide companionship through social access while remaining unable to purchase love.

Wealth can defend reputation for a time, yet it cannot cleanse conscience. It can alter the circumstances in which grief is experienced, but it cannot prevent bereavement.

The labouring man in the passage sleeps because his work is finished for the day and his portion is comparatively simple. The rich man lies awake because abundance extends his concerns beyond the present hour. His possessions continue producing questions after his body has attempted to rest.

This does not mean that every poor man sleeps peacefully or every wealthy person lives anxiously. The contrast exposes a spiritual possibility: what a person owns may eventually begin to own his attention.

Possession becomes a master when its loss is more frightening than disobedience. The person may compromise truth, neglect relationships, or remain trapped in work he no longer ought to serve because his standard of life has become impossible to release.

He may speak of responsibility while actually protecting an identity built around visible success. The fear is not merely that money will be lost, but that without it he will become smaller in the eyes of others and perhaps in his own.

Ecclesiastes does not answer this fear by requiring careless disposal of everything accumulated. It restores wealth to the category of stewardship. Money may be earned, saved, used, enjoyed, and given, but it remains a temporary trust rather than a permanent refuge.

Stewardship asks what resources are for. Hoarding asks how much must be retained before the soul can feel safe. The first is capable of generosity because ownership is understood as responsibility; the second experiences giving as a threat to survival.

The capacity to enjoy one's portion is therefore a greater gift than the capacity to enlarge it. Gratitude allows what is present to become visible. Without gratitude, abundance remains surrounded by the shadow of what is still absent.

The restless soul stores because it fears the future. Prudence may prepare for what can reasonably be expected, but fear attempts to purchase

certainty. No account can contain enough to guarantee that life will unfold according to plan.

Wealth is useful precisely because it is limited. It can provide many good things, but it cannot become the ground of the soul. Once this boundary is accepted, possession may serve life without being required to secure it.

What man holds will eventually pass from his hands. The question is not whether wealth can prevent that surrender, but whether it will be used faithfully before the surrender comes.

## Wisdom at the edge of mystery

Wisdom promises a different kind of security from wealth or pleasure. It offers the hope that life can be understood, dangers anticipated, and suffering reduced through clear judgement. The wise person observes consequences, learns from experience, and avoids many errors that repeatedly injure the foolish.

Ecclesiastes values this kind of wisdom. It does not suggest that ignorance is harmless or that every decision is equally sound. Yet the Preacher also discovers that wisdom has a boundary. It may guide man through life, but it cannot place him above life.

The wise still encounter events they did not predict. They may act rightly and receive an unjust outcome, while those who ignore wisdom may prosper for a time. Knowledge can reveal patterns, but it cannot make the world entirely controllable.

This limitation becomes especially visible in the presence of sorrow. Much of modern life is arranged to keep sorrow at a distance. Entertainment, activity, consumption, and conversation can all be used to prevent the soul from remaining with truths it would rather avoid.

The Preacher makes the unsettling claim that the house of mourning may teach what the house of pleasure cannot.

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### **Ecclesiastes 7:2–4**

It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

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These words do not glorify sadness or condemn celebration. The Preacher is comparing what each place reveals. The house of feasting allows life to be enjoyed, but the house of mourning forces man to remember where life is going.

Death removes many of the distinctions upon which pride depends. Status, beauty, productivity, wealth, influence, and intelligence all meet a boundary they cannot cross by their own power. In mourning, the soul is confronted with the fragility it usually keeps hidden.



This confrontation can make the heart better because it restores proportion. Arguments that once appeared urgent may become small. Possessions that demanded constant attention lose some of their authority, and withheld words of affection begin to appear costly.

Sorrow does not automatically produce wisdom. It can harden, isolate, or embitter a person. The house of mourning becomes instructive only when the living allow what they have seen to enter the heart.

To lay death to heart is to permit mortality to alter the way life is being lived. It asks whether present loyalties will still appear worthy when the end is near. It examines what has been postponed, what has been worshipped, and what has been sacrificed for things that cannot remain.

The foolish heart remains in the house of mirth because continual amusement protects it from this examination. Laughter itself is not foolish, but laughter used to silence every serious thought prevents maturity. A person may remain outwardly cheerful while inwardly refusing to face the truth.

Wisdom therefore involves the courage to remain present before what cannot be quickly repaired. It does not hurry to convert every loss into a lesson or explain every sorrow through a simple religious answer.

Some experiences remain mysterious even after years of reflection. The person may eventually understand what suffering changed within him without understanding why that particular suffering was permitted. Wisdom can grow while explanation remains incomplete.

The critical voice may object that accepting mystery is an excuse for intellectual surrender. Humanity has advanced because people refused to accept suffering, disease, injustice, and ignorance as inevitable. Should we not continue searching for causes and answers?

There is no virtue in refusing knowledge that can be gained. Wisdom investigates, questions, learns, and acts upon what is discovered. The boundary appears when man assumes that everything must be understandable before it can be endured or obeyed.

A person may know what faithfulness requires without knowing everything God is doing. He may be called to forgive without understanding why the offence was allowed, to continue serving without seeing the result, or to accept a closed door whose purpose remains concealed.

The demand for a complete explanation may appear reasonable, but it can become another form of control. The soul says that it will trust only after every contradiction has been resolved. In doing so, it makes its own understanding the authority before which God must answer.

Ecclesiastes does not ask man to abandon reason. It asks reason to recognise its place. Human sight is partial, human memory is selective, and human judgement is shaped by a moment within a much larger history.

What appears meaningless from within one season may later be understood differently. Other events may never become clear within this life. Humility is the ability to distinguish between what has not yet been understood and what man has no right to claim he fully comprehends.

Wisdom also accepts correction. The Preacher says that rebuke from the wise is better than the song of fools because truth is more valuable than pleasant approval. The restless soul often seeks reassurance rather than instruction, especially when its preferred interpretation is threatened.

A flattering voice confirms that the problem always lies elsewhere. A wise voice may reveal pride, haste, self-deception, or responsibility. The discomfort of correction can therefore produce more lasting good than the immediate pleasure of praise.

The truly wise person does not become certain of his own innocence merely because he can identify the foolishness of others. Greater understanding should produce greater humility because it reveals how easily motives become mixed and judgement becomes distorted.

Wisdom remains better than folly, but it cannot save man from mortality, remove every injustice, or explain the whole work of God. Its purpose is not to make the soul sovereign. It teaches the soul how to walk faithfully while much remains unseen.

The house of mourning strips away the illusion that knowledge can secure life. It returns man to the truths that pleasure postpones and ambition conceals. His days are limited, his judgement is partial, and his need for God is not a problem that greater intelligence will remove.

The restless soul believes peace will come when it finally understands everything. Ecclesiastes offers a more sober freedom. Man may pursue wisdom, receive correction, and act truthfully without requiring the whole mystery of existence to fit within his mind.

## The shadow of death

Death stands behind every subject Ecclesiastes has examined. Pleasure passes because the person enjoying it cannot remain. Labour changes hands because the worker must eventually release it. Wealth, wisdom, reputation, and power all meet the same boundary.

The Preacher does not soften this truth by claiming that outward circumstances always reveal moral worth. The righteous may suffer beside the wicked, while wisdom and folly do not always receive their proper reward within this life. Death appears to bring very different lives towards the same visible end.

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### **Ecclesiastes 9:4–6**

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

For the living know that they shall die; but the dead know not anything, neither have they anymore a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they anymore a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.

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The comparison between the living dog and the dead lion is deliberately severe. The lion possesses strength and honour, while the dog represented something far less dignified. Yet the weakest living creature still possesses what the greatest dead creature has lost: the opportunity to act.

Life retains possibility while breath remains. Repentance can still be offered, affection expressed, wrong corrected, mercy extended, and faithfulness begun. Death closes the period in which earthly choices can be made.

This gives the present a seriousness that restlessness often obscures. The dissatisfied person keeps looking towards another season in which real life will supposedly begin. He postpones gratitude, reconciliation, obedience, or courage because he assumes that time will continue providing further opportunities.

Ecclesiastes removes that assumption. The living know that they shall die, but knowledge of death does not always become awareness of mortality. A person may accept death as a general truth while living as though it belongs mainly to others.

The soul protects itself through distance. Death is associated with old age, severe illness, or unusual tragedy, while the ordinary day is treated as though it carried no relation to the grave. Yet the Preacher says that man does not know his time.

This uncertainty need not produce panic. Its purpose is to expose postponement. The fact that life will end gives weight to what is being done now.

The Preacher's response is not withdrawal from affection or ordinary enjoyment. He directs the living back towards bread, labour, marriage, and the work before their hands. Mortality does not make these things worthless; it prevents them from being taken for granted.

A meal becomes more precious when it is received rather than assumed. The presence of a loved person becomes more significant when neither life is treated as permanent property. Work becomes urgent not because achievement conquers death, but because the opportunity to serve is limited.

The critical voice may argue that attachment is foolish when loss is certain. Why love deeply if death will eventually separate? Why build anything that time will dismantle?

Such reasoning attempts to avoid grief by refusing the gift that grief may later remove. It mistakes invulnerability for wisdom. A life protected from loss by withholding love would also be protected from much of what makes life human.

Mortality does not invalidate love. It reveals that love must be given while the beloved is present. The certainty of separation should not make affection smaller, but more honest and less delayed.

Death also strips away many forms of pretence. Rivalries that consumed years appear strangely small beside the grave. The need to be admired, superior, vindicated, or continually noticed loses force when the person remembers that public attention cannot accompany him beyond life.

This does not mean that earthly actions cease to matter. Ecclesiastes will end with judgement, not oblivion. Death removes man from life under the sun, but it does not remove him from accountability before God.

The knowledge of judgement prevents mortality from becoming nihilism. If death were simply the extinction of all meaning, then courage and

cruelty would finally arrive at the same moral emptiness. The closing movement of Ecclesiastes will not permit that conclusion.

For the moment, the Preacher asks the living to recognise their portion. Today remains open. The hand can still do what it finds to do, and the heart can still be turned towards God.

The restless soul fears death because it threatens everything upon which identity has been built. Possessions must be surrendered, achievements left behind, and the image maintained before others released.

The faithful soul does not become indifferent to death, but it no longer expects created things to defeat it. It receives life as temporary stewardship and understands that its final security must lie beyond what the grave can take.

Death is the great boundary of life under the sun. It does not declare that nothing matters. It declares that there is limited time in which to discover what matters most.

## Bread upon the waters

Restlessness does not always produce frantic activity. It can also produce hesitation. A person may become so concerned about choosing correctly, avoiding loss, or securing the outcome that he delays action until every uncertainty has been removed.

That moment rarely comes. Life requires decisions before all the facts are known, commitments before every consequence can be seen, and obedience before success can be guaranteed. The desire for certainty can therefore become a respectable form of avoidance.

Ecclesiastes does not praise recklessness. The Preacher values wisdom, foresight, and careful judgement. Yet he also recognises that excessive caution can make faithfulness impossible.

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### **Ecclesiastes 11:4–6**

He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

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The farmer who watches the wind is not foolish for noticing the conditions. Wind and rain matter. His mistake begins when observation becomes an excuse for permanent delay.

There will always be some reason not to sow. Conditions may improve tomorrow, dangers may become clearer, and another opportunity may appear more favourable. If action depends upon certainty, however, the field will remain empty.

Much of life is lost in this way. The conversation is postponed because the right words have not been found. The work is not begun because the finished result cannot yet be imagined. The apology is delayed because the response of the injured person cannot be controlled.

A person may call this caution, but fear often hides beneath it. He wants assurance that the attempt will succeed before he is willing to risk failure. He would rather preserve the possibility of success than expose himself to the reality of an imperfect effort.



The Preacher answers this fear by reminding man of what he does not know. Human beings cannot explain every hidden work of God, yet life continues to unfold beyond their understanding. The child grows within the womb before the observer can account for every mystery of that growth.

Ignorance does not stop God from working. It should not always stop man from obeying.

This distinction matters because faithfulness is not the same as prediction. A person may know what is right to do while remaining uncertain about what will result from it. He may give generously without knowing how the gift will be used, speak truth without knowing whether it will be accepted, or begin a good work without knowing whether another will complete it.

The restless soul wants to manage the entire chain of consequences. It assumes that responsibility includes control over every outcome. When that control is impossible, the person either becomes anxious or refuses to act.

Ecclesiastes returns responsibility to its proper boundary. The farmer must sow, but he cannot command the seed to prosper. He may prepare the soil, choose the time carefully, and labour diligently, yet growth remains beyond his authority.

The same is true of human influence. Parents may teach without being able to determine every choice their children will make. Leaders may prepare successors without controlling what those successors will become. A person may offer love without possessing the heart of the one who receives it.

Uncertainty does not cancel duty. It reveals the difference between obedience and sovereignty.

The instruction to sow in the morning and continue in the evening also guards against placing all hope in a single effort. Man does not know which work will prosper. One attempt may fail while another bears fruit, or both may contribute to a result that could not have been foreseen.

This encourages perseverance without promising success in every undertaking. Faithfulness may require repeated action, adjustment, and patience. It does not require the pretence that every seed will grow.

The critical voice may argue that such teaching could justify poor planning. People may act impulsively and then claim that outcomes belong to God. Yet trust in providence does not release anyone from wisdom.

The person who refuses preparation is not exercising faith. He is asking God to protect him from the consequences of negligence. Ecclesiastes opposes paralysis, not thoughtfulness.

Wisdom considers the wind but does not worship it. It recognises danger without demanding a world in which danger has disappeared. The question is not whether uncertainty exists, but whether uncertainty will be allowed to govern the soul.

There are moments when waiting is faithful, just as there are moments when waiting becomes fear. Discernment lies in knowing whether delay is serving obedience or protecting the self from discomfort.

The person who waits faithfully remains attentive and ready. The fearful person repeatedly changes the conditions under which he will finally act. Each resolved concern produces another requirement, and caution becomes a permanent refuge.

Life under the sun offers no position from which every consequence can be known in advance. Man must act from within limitation. He can seek wisdom, receive counsel, consider the cost, and still reach the point at which a decision must be made without certainty.

The restless soul wants a guarantee. Faithfulness accepts a calling.

The seed must eventually leave the hand. Until it does, nothing can grow.

## Remember thy creator

Ecclesiastes now turns from the uncertainty of action to the certainty of decline. The young are told to rejoice in their strength, but they are also warned not to confuse strength with permanence. Youth can create the impression that time is abundant and that serious questions may be postponed.

The body appears dependable when it answers quickly, recovers easily, and carries responsibility without visible strain. A person can then imagine that ageing belongs to another kind of life, distant from the one he is presently living. The future is treated as though it will always provide another opportunity to reconsider what matters.

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**Ecclesiastes 12:1**

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

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To remember the Creator means more than recalling that God exists. It is to live with an active awareness that life has been given, that the self is created rather than self-made, and that every season remains accountable to the One from whom it came.

The command is addressed to youth because postponement becomes easier when strength is plentiful. A person may assume that he will turn towards God once ambition has been satisfied, responsibilities have reduced, pleasures have been explored, or the difficult work of establishing life has been completed.

That imagined season of spiritual availability rarely arrives in the form expected. Habits deepen, loyalties harden, responsibilities change rather than disappear, and the heart becomes practised in giving its attention elsewhere. The person who repeatedly postpones remembrance may discover that he has trained himself to live without it.

Ecclesiastes describes ageing through the gradual weakening of the body. The keepers of the house tremble, strong men bow, sight darkens, hearing diminishes, and ordinary movement becomes burdened by fear. These images are not intended to humiliate the old. They expose the temporary nature of capacities that the young easily mistake for permanent possession.

Ageing is not a failure of character. It is the visible evidence that bodily strength was always held on trust. The person may care for his health and remain responsible for his choices, but no discipline can finally prevent the body from returning to the earth.

This return need not make later life empty. The soul does not lose value as the body loses strength. Indeed, the weakening of outward capacity may reveal qualities that achievement once concealed: patience, dependence, gratitude, humility, and the ability to receive care.

Yet decline can become spiritually severe when identity has been built entirely upon usefulness. The person who only knows himself as strong, productive, admired, or needed may experience ageing as personal erasure. What has been lost is not merely ability, but the structure through which he believed his life mattered.

Remembering the Creator before this season arrives places identity elsewhere. Work may reduce, influence may pass to others, and independence may narrow, but the person remains a creature known by God. His worth was never created by his strongest years and cannot be cancelled by their ending.

The command also carries urgency because remembrance affects the use of present strength. Youth is not condemned as vanity because energy, beauty, and opportunity are evil. They become vain when they are spent as though no account will be given for them.

The critical voice may ask whether this places too much fear upon the young. Should they not be permitted to enjoy life without being continually reminded of decline and death?

Ecclesiastes does permit rejoicing. Its warning protects joy from becoming waste. To remember judgement is not to reject delight; it is to prevent delight from becoming careless, cruel, or detached from responsibility.

A person who remembers his Creator may enjoy youth without worshipping it. He can receive strength without despising weakness, pursue opportunity without assuming entitlement, and prepare for the future without pretending that the future belongs to him.

The command is also merciful towards those who believe they remembered too late. Ecclesiastes speaks with urgency, but it does not declare that grace belongs only to the young. The person who turns

towards God in weakness is not rejected because earlier years were misused.

Nevertheless, late remembrance cannot restore every neglected relationship or recover every opportunity. Forgiveness removes guilt before God, but it does not make time reversible. This is why the present moment matters.

The restless soul delays surrender because it fears that obedience will reduce life. It imagines that God can be considered later, after the self has taken what it wants from the world. Ecclesiastes reveals the opposite danger: a life spent avoiding the Creator becomes smaller, not larger, because it is organised around gifts that are already passing away.

To remember God is to place every season within its true setting. Youth becomes stewardship, maturity becomes responsibility, ageing becomes release, and death becomes return.

The soul does not need to wait until strength fails before asking what strength was for. It can remember now, while choices remain open and the day still offers work to be done.

## Fear God and Keep His Commandments

Ecclesiastes has examined what man can see, possess, achieve, enjoy, and understand under the sun. Each pursuit contains some genuine good, yet none can provide a final foundation for the soul. Pleasure fades, labour passes to another, wealth cannot prevent vulnerability, and wisdom reaches mysteries it cannot penetrate.

The book does not end by declaring that life is meaningless. It ends by restoring life to its proper order. Man is not asked to abandon the world, but to live within it before God.

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### **Ecclesiastes 12:13–14**

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

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The fear of God is not presented as one religious concern among many. It is the conclusion towards which the whole argument has been moving. Once the false promises of life under the sun have been exposed, man is returned to the One before whom life possesses meaning.

To fear God is to recover proportion. The Creator is no longer treated as a supporting presence within a life organised around human desire. He becomes the centre by which work, pleasure, wealth, wisdom, time, and mortality are understood.

This fear includes reverence, submission, moral seriousness, and the recognition that man is accountable. It is not merely an emotion of alarm. The person who fears God accepts that his life is received rather than owned and that he does not possess the authority to redefine good and evil according to convenience.

This is why the command to fear God is joined immediately to obedience. Ecclesiastes does not end in vague spirituality. Man is not told simply to admire mystery, accept limitation, or feel awe before creation.

He is told to keep the commandments.

Obedience prevents reverence from becoming sentimental. A person may speak warmly about God, creation, eternity, and the mystery of existence while continuing to live according to his own will. The fear of God becomes real where it alters conduct.



This gives moral shape to the answer Ecclesiastes provides. Work is not merely to be enjoyed; it must be done honestly. Wealth is not merely to be received; it must be used justly. Speech is not merely to be restrained; it must become truthful.

Human limitation does not excuse disobedience. Man may not understand every work of God, but he has been given enough light to know that cruelty, deceit, pride, exploitation, and selfishness violate the order in which life was meant to be lived.

The restless soul often wants explanation before obedience. It argues that it cannot surrender until every doubt has been resolved or every painful event has been justified. Ecclesiastes reverses that demand.

Man is not placed in judgement over God. He is called to live faithfully within the knowledge he has received, even while much remains beyond him.

The final verse introduces judgement because life under the sun does not always reveal the true weight of human action. Evil may prosper, goodness may remain hidden, and secret motives may never be exposed before other people. If earthly outcome were the final measure, much of life would remain morally unresolved.

Judgement declares that nothing is finally lost in obscurity. Every work and every secret thing are brought before God. The unseen act of mercy matters, and so does the hidden cruelty that public reputation concealed.

This truth answers the problem of injustice without pretending that justice always arrives quickly. The oppressor may retain power for many years, and the wounded may die without receiving public vindication. Ecclesiastes does not claim that history will settle every account.

It claims that God will.

Judgement also protects the value of ordinary faithfulness. Many lives leave little visible record. Their work is absorbed into families, communities, and institutions without their names being remembered.

Before God, hidden faithfulness does not become insignificant because history overlooked it. The person who acted rightly without applause has not laboured in vain simply because no monument preserves the effort.

The critical voice may object that judgement reintroduces fear at the moment the book appears to be offering rest. How can the soul become peaceful if every secret thing will be examined?

There can be no lasting rest in a universe where evil is never judged. A peace built upon moral indifference would offer comfort to the powerful at the expense of those they harmed. Divine judgement is fearful because human action matters, but it is also the assurance that wrong will not possess the final word.

For the repentant soul, accountability does not require despair. The purpose of remembering judgement is not to create endless inward accusation. It is to end the fantasy that man can live without consequence and still remain whole.

The fear of God frees created things from the burden of becoming ultimate. Work can be done without becoming identity. Pleasure can be enjoyed without becoming escape. Wealth can be held without becoming refuge, and wisdom can be pursued without becoming sovereignty.

Each thing returns to its proper measure because God alone occupies the place the restless soul had attempted to fill with the world.

This does not remove sorrow, uncertainty, or death. The person who fears God still lives within time and encounters seasons he cannot control. He may lose what he loves, see injustice remain unresolved, and reach the edge of understanding without receiving every answer.

What changes is the foundation beneath these experiences. The soul no longer depends upon the visible world to justify itself. Meaning does not rise from what man can preserve but from the God before whom nothing faithful is forgotten.

Ecclesiastes has taken the reader through weariness in order to expose misplaced hope. Its severity is not designed to make life smaller. It clears away the demands that prevented life from being received as a gift.

The conclusion of the whole matter is therefore both simple and demanding. Man is to fear God, obey Him, and live in the knowledge that every life will be brought into truth.

The restless soul keeps searching because it hopes another possession, experience, achievement, or explanation will finally make surrender unnecessary. Ecclesiastes closes that search.

There is no created thing large enough to become the centre of the soul.  
Rest begins when God is no longer treated as one part of life, but as the  
One before whom the whole of life is lived.