James Philip Bible Readings

THE BOOK of Ecclesiastes

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THE BOOK of Ecclesiastes

The Book of Ecclesiastes belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, along with Job and Proverbs. What has prompted its inclusion at this time is the paper that was delivered at the Crieff Ministers' Conference in October by the Rev. Dominic Smart of Logie and St John's Cross Church, Dundee, on the subject of Post Modernism. This was a most impressive statement underlining the essential characteristics of this movement with its subjectivism, its incoherence, its pluralism, its meaninglessness, its pessimism and its ultimate despair. It is hoped that the paper will yet appear in pamphlet form for wider reading. One readily thought of the Book of Ecclesiastes while listening to it, for this also is a remarkable document in which the Preacher addresses himself to a search for the key to the meaning of life. The note of pessimism, even cynicism and despair, that pervades the book has made some question whether the book should be in the biblical canon at all. But this is to misunderstand it, for not only are the pessimism and despair shown to be the character of life 'under the sun' but also the real answer to such a life is given as lying in faith in God. It is, in essence, a critique of secularism, and it is as such that we should study it.

I) *1:1-18*

The New Bible Dictionary (IVP) begins its outline of the contents of Ecclesiastes with the following comment: 'The theme of the book is a search for the key to the meaning of life. The Preacher examines life from all angles to see where satisfaction can be found. He finds that God alone holds the key, and He must be trusted. Meanwhile we are to take life day by day from His hand, and glorify Him in the ordinary things.

Within this general framework Ecclesiastes falls into two main divisions of thought, (a) 'the futility of life', and (b) 'the answer of practical faith'. These run concurrently through its chapters. In the outline of the book (given in the next Note) the passages belonging to the first category are printed in Roman type, and those belonging to the second in italics.'

In other words, what the Preacher is doing is to outline and identify the problems and mysteries of life 'under the sun', on ground level, so to speak, and gives answers to them from the higher spiritual point of view. Here, then, is a book which although at first sight is full of futility and pessimism and indeed meaninglessness, has a very pointed message - and one that is very relevant - for our day and generation, confronted as we are with the countless numbers of people today who are unable to make any sense of life and see no meaning in it.

2) *1:1-18*

The following outline of Contents is given in the New Bible Dictionary by the Rev J. Stafford Wright, one time Principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol:

1:1-2	The theme of futility stated.
1:3-11	Nature is a closed system, and history a succession of events.
1:12-18	Wisdom discourages man.
2:1-11	Pleasure leaves him unsatisfied.
2:12-23	Wisdom is to be rated above such things, but death defeats the wise and foolish alike.
2:24-26	*Take life day by day from God, and glorify Him in ordinary things.*
3:1-15	*Live step by step and remember that God alone knows the whole plan.*
3:16	The problem of injustice.
3:17	*God will judge all.*
3:18-21	Man dies like the beasts.
3:22	*God must therefore be glorified in this life.*
4:1-5	The problems of oppression and envy.
4:6	*Quietness of spirit is therefore to be sought.*
4:7-8	The lonely miser.
4:9-12	*The blessing of friendship.*
4:13-16	The failure of kings.
5:1-7	*The nature of the true worshipper.*
5:8-9	Oppressive officialdom.
5:10; 6:12	Money brings many evils.
6:18-20	Be content with what God gives.
7:1-29	*Practical wisdom, involving the fear of God, is a guide for life.*
8:1-7	*Man must submit to God's commands even though the future is hidden.*
8:8; 9:3	The problem of death, which comes to all alike.
9:4-10	Since death is universal, use life energetically while its power remains.
9:11-12	But do not be proud of natural talents.
9:13 - 10:20	More proverbs for practical living.
11:9 - 12:8	Remember God in youth, for old age weakens the faculties.
12:9-12	Listen to wise words.

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3) ***1:1-18***

The phrase used in our introductory Note, 'a critique of secularism' is a very apposite one in describing Ecclesiastes, and it serves to indicate the relevance of its message for our own day and generation. For the prevailing philosophy of our time - existentialism - is one that is characterised in its essence by meaninglessness and despair. One writer, analysing it, refers to its 'anguished version of the implacable absurdity of the universe', and its 'idea of total uncertainty, not mere social or personal disorientation, but the fundamental and irreparable loss of all the co-ordinates that used to give men their bearings in the world'. Another writer speaks of the sense of waste in life, and man's fear of anonymity, of being born, suffering through his small span of years, dying and being forgotten, so that in a short time the record of his passing through the world is extinguished; and that the anguish lies in an awareness that life - for some at least - can be pleasant, but that the shortness of the good years makes nonsense of the whole life experience; that the shortness of life, the anguish of love, or the agony of a man trapped between a reluctant birth and an unknown end, constitutes at once man's real struggle and his despair. All this certainly reflects the theme with which the Preacher deals in these chapters before us. Ecclesiastes is very conscious of the twin facts of evil and death, and the whole book has been described as an exposition of the curse of the Fall, evil and death. As one commentator writes, 'Bracket the whole of life under the sun with a negative sign and defy all attempts to force it to yield either sense or satisfaction by itself'. 'Vanity of vanities' is not his verdict on life in general, but only on the misguided human endeavour to treat the created world as an end in itself.

4) ***1:1-11***

Given the premise that this life is all that there is to life, then the only possible conclusion is despair and emptiness, and all attempts to force it to yield either sense or satisfaction are doomed to despair. Nature is a closed system, and history a mere succession of events. As someone has said, 'man is perpetually toiling, yet of all his toils there remains no abiding result. The natural world exhibits the spectacle of unceasing activity with no real progress'. It is important for us to realise, however, that this is not the message that the Preacher has to proclaim. Rather, his purpose is to meet on their own ground people who think of the world in these terms, and to say, in effect, to them: 'This is all you think the world is? Very well, you must realise that certain things follow on this premise'. And step by step he brings people to the position of utter despair, destroying with merciless blows the false happinesses which they continually seek in the world, and which never fulfil their promise, in order that they might be able to find true happiness in accepting life in all its changes and chances from the hand of God. This is the way of faith. Despair does not have the last word - although it will have, if God is left out - there is something else to be said and the Preacher proclaims that 'something else' - the reality of the unseen world, and the life of God that can break into the soul of man - and he does so, sometimes in whimsical ways and with a quiet humour which is very refreshing.

5) ***1:12-18***

What is true of nature (underlining the previous verses) is also true of human experience as we know it. And, on the original premise that this life is all there is to life - i.e. life under the sun - then no attempt to give it meaning will ever succeed, however bold, imaginative or comprehensive that attempt may be. Thus, first of all, the failure of wisdom is underlined in these verses. It is interesting and significant that the Preacher's starting point is with wisdom. He begins by seeking to make an enlightened survey of human life. Here is a man confronting the world as we know it, and he says, 'Wisdom is the answer, I will think things through'. And he brings a serious thinking mind to the problems of the world as he encounters it. Life is in fact a challenge, and for anyone worth his salt it is a challenge to be mastered. Hence this serious attempt at the outset. This is the important thing here. It is not a lack of seriousness or sincerity that is the trouble, with many, it is just that their standpoint is wrong - 'under the sun' you can find no meaning: you come up against a brick wall, finding problems for which you have no answer. You find crooked things that cannot be made straight, either by human wisdom or by anything else human. You find that the more deeply you think about the world and its mysteries and realise that nothing can be done about them, the more touched by grief you become.

6) ***1-12-18***

The truth of what was said in the previous Note is well illustrated in some of the greatest literature of the ancients. The Greek tragedians - Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides - give penetrating and indeed devastating analysis of the human problems in all the intensity and complexity and indeed perversity of evil; but they had no real answer to it. This is why their plays read as gigantic monuments of darkness, terror and despair. In this respect they come very close to the Preacher's utterances in this book. Indeed, it would be true to say that no writers have ever come closer than these Greek dramatists to the analysis of the tragedy of human sin and its appalling consequences for all mankind given by the biblical writers. It is the latter alone who proclaim the answer to that tragedy, in the revelation of the gospel. And it is with this that Ecclesiastes shares common ground in the final words of his book, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth ... fear God and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man', words which, rightly understood, proclaim that gospel's message with true hope and confidence.

7) ***2:1-11***

Next comes the flight to pleasure following the failure of wisdom to give the answers to life. What is said in these verses prompts the reflection that it may have a good deal to say to us today about so much of the 'sick' theatre and literature around, and the never-ending mad round of pleasure indulged in with such frenetic activity. Sometimes we say of a man that he indulges in one long round of pleasure and does not have a single serious thing in his mind. But is this really so? Perhaps, once there were many serious thoughts in that mind for which no answer was found and he turned to the round of pleasure as an escape from the intolerable questionings of life. At all events (1, 2), this also proved an illusory hope. In 3ff, we are introduced to a broader spectrum with the lure of culture. Two things stand out here. One is that when we read these verses we find ourselves thinking 'What a tremendous zest for life, what an intensity of activity'. Just to read of all this is exhausting. But is there not something underlying this? Do we not detect in what is said a quest for an answer that persistently eludes? It is true that from one point of view it is a very full life that is described, with nothing diluted or watered down. It is very much a matter of 'one thing after another'. Some people have an incredible energy to expend, and do expend it, in such a 'living-it-up' pattern, yet the answer is always the same - vanity. And the impression that comes through, in spite of the cultural abundance, is one of a basic dreariness of life, with the same old round, getting nowhere, and a spectacle of unceasing activity, with no progress, always coming back to 'square one'. The verdict must always be the same: vanity and vexation of spirit, and no profit under the sun (11).

8) ***2:12-23***

The point that is being made in 12b is this: if a king, with all the resources at his command, cannot find satisfaction in this way, what hope or chance can there be for any other man? Indeed, the king's successor in office will fare no better than he, for he will be condemned to the same failure. In the verses that follow (13ff) we see a repetition in human experience of the same kind of cycle that is seen in nature, and described in the opening verses of chapter 1. Perhaps there is more significance than we had suspected in the familiar phrase we use to describe all this - the 'round' of pleasure, for do we not always come back to 'square one'? Wisdom and folly are contrasted, it is true, in these verses, and the former is infinitely better than the latter. Yet, death levels both the wise and the foolish (14-16), as indeed do other less ultimate realities, such as sorrow or bereavement. And all is therefore vanity, if this life is all there is. The statement in 17, 'therefore I hated life' is all the more impressive when set in the context of 2:1-11. This is a moment of truth indeed. What a verdict of 'no confidence' this passes on such a life! We recall an incident that took place many years ago at a student mission when over coffee one day with one of the brightest and wildest students, an attractive personality who was certainly living it up in style, we got to discussing ultimate things, and asked him, 'Alistair, are you happy?' We shall not easily forget his answer, as with widened eyes, he said, 'Me, happy? Oh no!' And in so saying, he surely said it all. That is the message here.

9) ***2:24-26***

As we leave the earlier verses, we should perhaps note the telltale evidence of malaise in what is said in 23, 'his heart taketh not rest in the night'. One might well think of that unhappy young man lying in bed one night, unable to sleep, with a great desolation enveloping him. He would know exactly what the Preacher's words meant!

These verses at the end of the chapter bring a momentary flash of something else, an alternative possibility. It will be seen from the analysis sheet (see Note Pg 4) that this is the first answer 'from the other side', so to speak, with the message 'Take life day by day, from God, and glorify Him in ordinary things'. We must be careful, however, that we do not misinterpret what is said in 24, for this is not to be taken in a bad sense, nor is there any note of 'let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die' in what is said. Rather, we are to understand that it is possible to live ordinary, daily life and extract from it that which can bless and cheer and comfort and content the heart. The Preacher is not referring to complete contentment or satisfaction in this life, for there is no such thing; the best is yet to be for those who believe in Christ. But the secret of true contentment here is to be happy with incomplete satisfaction and fulfilment, in the hope and assurance of lasting satisfaction and fulfilment in the life to come. Here is a glimpse of another way of life indeed, which is echoed and made explicit in the New Testament. And we shall look at that teaching more fully in the next Note.

10) ***2:24-26***

There are a number of New Testament references which may well be looked at on this theme. One is 1 Corinthians 7:29-32. It may be thought that Paul's words here are a far cry from Ecclesiastes, but this is to misunderstand the Apostle's meaning: he is not giving expression to an extreme form of asceticism here and it is to misunderstand him to suppose that these verses reveal the Apostle as a woman hater and as forbidding marriage. What he is proclaiming is a doctrine of detachment, whether in relation to marriage, sorrow or joy, or the possession of this world's goods. 'I would have you without carefulness', he says - that is, without preoccupation, without anxiety. He does not mean that one feels hard or indifferent towards either human relationships or the varying experiences of life, but it does mean that in the light of eternity, it is possible to be detached within them. This is the secret that puts a look of serenity upon the faces of those who may have broken hearts. In Philippians 4:11 Paul is able to say, 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content'. This was because for him life did not consist either in having or in not having things or people or relationships. 'To me to live is Christ', he said and, thus attached to Christ, he was detached from every earthly consideration, including even the dearest human ties. We may ask, in relation to 1 Corinthians 7:31, what it means to use this world 'as not abusing it'. One abuses the world when one tries to extract from it something to satisfy our deepest hearts, for the world was never designed to fulfil this purpose. There is a wonderful verse in the next chapter of Ecclesiastes (3:11) that God has set eternity (a 'forever') in our hearts and it is only the eternity of the divine love that can ever meet that deep within us. There is still more to be said on this theme and we shall continue it in the next Note.

11) ***2:24-26***

Another statement by the Apostle is relevant in this connection. In 1 Timothy 6:17 he speaks of God as giving us 'richly all things to enjoy'. There is no asceticism in God's dealings with His children. He wants us to enjoy the good gifts of His creation and providence - but the operative word there is 'enjoy' - we must not set too much store by them, or become preoccupied with them, and still less expect them to give to us what they were never designed or intended to give. The words of Adelaide Anne Proctor's lovely hymn (RCH 441) express this profound truth very beautifully:

> My God, I thank Thee, who hast made the earth so bright,
> So full of splendour and of joy, beauty and light;
> So many glorious things are here, noble and right.
>
> I thank Thee, too, that Thou hast made joy to abound,
> So many gentle thoughts and deeds circling us round
> That in the darkest spot of earth some love is found.
>
> I thank Thee more that all our joy is touched with pain,
> That shadows fall on brightest hours, that thorns remain,
> So that earth's bliss may be our guide, and not our chain.
>
> For Thou, who knowest, Lord, how soon our weak heart clings
> Hast given us joys, tender and true, yet all with wings,
> So that we see, gleaming on high, diviner things.
>
> I thank Thee, Lord, that here our souls, though amply blest,
> Can never find, although they seek, a perfect rest,
> Nor ever shall, until they lean on Jesus' breast.

Earth's bliss our guide and not our chain - joys, tender and true, yet all with wings - do not these words say it all? If God has set eternity (a 'forever') in our hearts (3:11), and invested us with immortality in our destiny as creatures of God, and yet paradoxically, we are finite creatures, it is this that explains why man is on a cleft stick, impaled upon this eternal paradox, and unable to find rest till he finds rest in God.

12) ***3:1-15***

The paradox mentioned at the end of the previous Note - between the immortal and the finite in man's experience and constitution - is now further developed in this passage. The words in 1-8 are well known and often quoted. But we need to ask what they mean and what is their connection with what is being said in the present context. There are two points to note: the first is that the necessity for detachment, already mentioned in earlier Notes, is underlined once more. It is vain to hope for an ordered, systematic existence without the changes and vicissitudes of life, for life is just not like that. It is not all laughing or dancing, nor is it all smooth. Therefore, we must be rightly related to it. Paul's experience in prison, as described in Philippians 4:11, 12 illustrates this well: he knew how to be abased and how to abound. He was adaptable. And he was adaptable because he was detached. This must be our pattern also: we must take each change as it comes, and learn to glorify God in it. The other point to note is that there is a contrast and antithesis between 'time' and 'eternity' here, which adds to man's perplexity, and for this reason: the 'eternity' in man's heart leads him to long for permanence and the unchanging, whereas, in fact, he is confronted with the reality of the transient and the changing. Also, the paradox of his experience, namely that he is an immortal creature, with eternity set in his heart, and yet finite and mortal, a limited creature, means that he cannot see the end from the beginning, as God does, and is not able to see rhyme or reason in the 'times' that change. Man sees from 'under the sun', and it is the under side of the tapestry he sees, which is often incomprehensible.

13) ***3:1-15***

The tension between 'today' and 'forever' in the life of man cannot be fully resolved. Yet man can find 'forever' in 'today' by gratefully accepting the gifts of God, and doing His commandments. The lesson is therefore that of the acceptance of life as it is, be aware the danger of expecting too much from it and of trying to satisfy the longings for eternity with the things of time. There is such a thing as divine discontent, and we must learn to live with it.

We have spoken about God setting eternity in our hearts. The AV translation of 11 obscures this, but the NIV translates correctly when it reads 'He has also set eternity in the hearts of men'. It is this that underlies Augustine's famous words 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee'. But it is a very strange thing, and one of the paradoxes of the gospel, that when men with a hunger in their hearts are drawn thereby to Christ and are saved, they find another, and even more intense, hunger born within them. By saving us, God has, as it were, quickened the 'infinite thing' within us, and made it pulsate and vibrate with living energy, so that as Christians, we yearn and long and hunger after God. There are deeps in the Christian's life that nothing but eternity will satisfy. The Preacher's advice here, then, is to accept the situation as it comes and to make the most of it, recognising the deeper dimension - i.e. God - and that what He does He does forever.

14) ***3:1-15***

The existence of this paradox, however, is something which Christians are very slow to recognise. Sometimes we do not realise it is there at all - if so, we are living very superficially. It is possible to over-emphasise the satisfaction that Christ can give us in this life. There is also a divine dissatisfaction and restlessness which He gives. Sometimes tragically, we also mistake this hunger for something else. We are determined to have this or that, because we think that is what will answer all our emotional or temperamental problems, convinced that this alone can make us happy. We fight tooth and nail to obtain it, and having obtained it, and taken our fill of it, taken all that it is capable of giving us, we find to our dismay that we are still not satisfied, but jaded and disillusioned. Why? Because God has set eternity in our hearts and we have tried to satisfy them with finite things, and it cannot be done. It is vanity, says Solomon, I tried it too, and it did not work. This is a biggish lesson for Christians to learn. But when they do, it has far-reaching consequences, for we change from 'being unhappy even in our happiness' to 'being happy even in our unhappiness'. And that is a far safer and healthier state!

15) ***3:16-22***

The Preacher faces another problem in these verses, that of injustice. There is a twofold possibility of interpretation here: the reference may be to corruption in the judiciary, in the law courts; on the other hand it may have a more general reference, to the injustices of life in the world, when we see things happening that make us call in question the moral government of the universe. We ask, 'Why does God allow war?' or 'Why do innocent people suffer?' There are, in fact, no simple answers to these questions: these things remain unresolved. But not knowing all the answers does not mean frustration and despair: it simply acknowledges our creatureliness. It is enough to know that God will judge (17). Man is certainly cut down to size in all this, and kept from presumption. The modern translations of 18 make it clear that what is being said is that God tests men 'so that they may see that they are like the animals'. This is a curious sort of statement, that we might be inclined to cavil at, but we will begin to see what the preacher means if we remember that he is speaking from the point of view of 'under the sun' and that he is echoing the thought expressed in Psalm 49:12-20: 'Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish'. Man's similarity to the beasts is only true from one point of view, insomuch and insofar as he regards himself merely biologically - in this regard he goes back to dust in the same way beasts do. But it is in his relationship to God that things are different. But he is different from the beasts by virtue of being made in the image of God and being invested with a soul. Man has self-consciousness: he knows he is a man: but the beast does not know that it is a beast. So much self-knowledge is given to man - but only so much, that is why man must be content with his own lot (22), accepting his creatureliness, in the spirit of 2:24 (see Note), remembering that 'under the sun' does not speak the final or truest word about the life of man.

16) ***4:1-6***

We now turn to an examination of the condition of the beings who 'under the sun' are no better than the beasts. This occupies the next three chapters, in which the Preacher considers in turn the sufferings of society (4:1-5), the reality of loneliness, even in those fortunate to amass wealth (4:7-12), the emptiness and disappointment of even the supreme earthly elevation, kingship (4:13-16), the limitations of even the religious life (5:1-7) and finally, the fact that wealth can bring worry as well as ease (5:8-6:12). These themes are interspersed with comments which indicate the 'higher wisdom', such as 4:6, 4:9-12, 5:18-20.

In the first of these sections (1-5) it is the problems of oppression (1-3) and envy (4, 5) that are the Preacher's concern. He is beholding the oppressions that are practised under the sun - a familiar picture in many parts of the world, in many different ages, and familiar even today. This is how it is in life, he says, and try as we will, we cannot make life very much better. Sorrows remain, for so often might prevails against right, without redress. The fact that this is so, however, does not mean that we must not do all we can to alleviate oppression and injustice; indeed this is our duty in terms of humanity, let alone in terms of the Christian gospel. It is our bounden duty to seek to alleviate oppression and injustice wherever it is to be found. But it is naive - and this is the point that is being made - to suppose that human effort will ever establish a Utopia upon earth. And since this is so - and remember, this is all 'under the sun' - it is better to be dead than alive (2). This echoes perfectly the pessimism and despair of the philosophers of the ancient world, with their saying 'The best thing of all is not to be born, and the next best thing is to die'. That is the essence of the wisdom that is 'under the sun'. Well might the Apostle Paul say, 'If in this life only we have in Christ hope we are of all men most miserable' (1 Corinthians 15:19).

17) ***4:1-6***

In 4, the modern versions give a more graphic rendering than the AV: 'All labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour' (NIV). What the Preacher is observing is the familiar theme of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. He speaks very cynically in this, but very realistically, because envy is, of its very nature, something unsatisfiable. You will always find somebody better off than you are, and even if you could reach the top and could not rise higher - and this is of course an unobtainable fantasy - you will still envy, for you would envy those who still had something to strive for. Once we jump on that particular bandwagon - or to change the metaphor, that vicious spiral - there is no saying how much lasting harm and misery the self-destructive process will bring to us (5). The antidote to all this is well expressed in 6 - quietness and contentment are the true riches, more to be desired and coveted than all the world's pomp and glory. Here is a telling comment from the Notes in the Gilcomston South Church Record: 'Are you content in your human situation, Christian? Can you sit down and relax and rest heart and mind and say, Thus am I, as God doubtless would have me now: It is enough, I am well content, for I am in His hand. This is not Christian service, we must be up and doing for that, but it is Christian being, and Christian work can only be done by Christian beings. Be first, then do.' (W. Still)

18) ***4:7-12***

Next, the Preacher observes a man who is alone; but it is loneliness in a particular context, for he is speaking about a man who makes money his sole aim in life. That is what makes for his loneliness and isolation. Two New Testament illustrations come readily to mind - the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10, and the parable of the Rich Farmer in Luke 12:16-21. Zacchaeus was isolated from his fellows by virtue of his tax gathering activities, and cordially hated by them, and remained so until Christ encountered him and broke into his isolation. The rich farmer in the parable lived in an isolation of his own making - there are more 'I's and personal pronouns in that little parable of a few verses than almost anywhere else in the New Testament. He was absolutely alone, and no one was ever allowed to break into that forlorn and miserable existence of his until it was too late. Here then, is someone who contracts out of society, out of communication with his fellows, in his sad preoccupation. He is a lone wolf, going it alone. There are those who think that 'going it alone' is a sign of strength, but the Bible would be inclined to say that it is a kind of sickness. And the antidote it prescribes is: two are better than one. As the Psalmist puts it, 'God sets the solitary in families'. It is worthy of notice that the Apostle Paul always seemed to be supplied with some companionship in his arduous missionary journeyings. There was always somebody there, God saw to that. Apart from his last spell of imprisonment, when he said 'No man stood with me', he had the comfort and encouragement of companionship in his labours. How heartily would he have endorsed the Preacher's statement in 9!

19) ***4:7-12***

As a postscript to our comments on loneliness we give the following remarkable 'poem' by the Roman philosopher, Seneca:

For who listens to us in all the world,
whether he be friend or teacher,
brother or father or mother,
sister or neighbour, son or ruler or servant?
Does he listen, our advocate, or our husbands or wives,
those who are dearest to us?
Do the stars listen, when we turn despairingly away
from man, or the great winds or the seas or the mountains?
To whom can any man say - Here I am!
Behold me in my nakedness, my wounds,
my secret grief, my despair, my betrayal,
my pain, my tongue which cannot express my sorrow,
my terror, my abandonment.
Listen to me for a day - an hour - a moment!
Lest I expire in my terrible wilderness,
my lonely silence!
Oh! God! Is there no one to listen?
Is there no one to listen, you ask?
Ah, yes, there is one who listens,
who will always listen. Hasten to him, my friend.
He waits on the hill for you.
For you alone.

20) ***4:13-16***

The emptiness and disappointment of even the supreme earthly elevation, kingship, is the Preacher's next observation. Even the most glittering prizes life holds out are vain. One commentator thinks there may well be an allusion here to some historical episode in which an old and decrepit monarch was displaced by a young man who came to the throne out of prison amid great rejoicing and jubilation, only to fall into disfavour himself in course of time. There is a considerable cynicism here in this comment on the fickleness of human popularity. Another commentator writes 'The promise of youth is always preferred to the petrification of age (as witness the studied illusion of perennial youth in contemporary fashion). But youth inevitably becomes age, and then it must endure the pain of seeing the fickle fancy of the mob turn elsewhere'. The fickleness of fame and popularity! The verses speak, as another commentator suggests, of what we might call 'the generation gap', the conflict between the old and the young and the competition between youth and age. They seem to speak of that part of life that is temporary and passing, and urge us to think that the story Jesus told about the two men who built their houses, and their lives, on shifting sand and solid rock. Such, then, is life 'under the sun'. Is there any answer? How can one find contentment in such a situation? There is only one answer: by drawing resources from above. We shall seek to illustrate this in the next Note.

21) ***4:13-16***

W.E. Sangster, of Westminster, gives the following illustration in his book 'The Craft of Sermon Illustration', to show how a Christian can maintain a healthy spiritual life in an alien environment:

'There is a little water spider to be found in our ponds and ditches, who lives beneath the water's surface in a kind of diver's bell.

'This is how he does it. He makes a thimble-shaped case of silk which he anchors by fine threads to the water weeds at the bottom of the pond. The orifice is turned downwards. The spider then goes up to the surface and, by means of hooked hairs which cover the lower part of his body, he entangles (as it were) a little bubble of air which he carries down and releases inside his little home. The air rises to the top of the bell that he has made and displaces a certain amount of water, and immediately he goes up again for more air and liberates it in the same way. Up and down he goes until finally the bell is filled with air and he lives, beneath the water's surface, something of the life above. As his use exhausts the oxygen he goes up for more, and he maintains his life in an alien environment only by a ceaseless vigilance.

'There is a lesson here for us. The life of the spirit can only be properly maintained by a constant correspondence with the spiritual world.'

22) ***5:1-7***

The New Bible Dictionary analysis (given earlier in these Notes) entitles this section, 'The nature of the true worshipper', but it may be that something else is in mind, namely, the emptiness and futility of what might be called 'religiosity', and that it is only by implication that true religion is in view. It has to be recognised, as one commentator points out, that secularised man in any age - whether in those far off days or in our own time - is by no means averse to religion. The Sadducees in New Testament times are the primary evidence of this. Religion was part of the established order of things for them, a social convenience, as it is so often today. The Sadducees were the religious rationalists of the day: they did not believe in the supernatural, they did not believe in miracles, they did not believe in resurrection; but they believed in religion. For them it was socially acceptable, and even more, a status symbol. And whenever and wherever this obtains, there is a tendency to 'make use' of God, to treat Him as an ally (of the establishment), an anodyne or an insurance agency. This is well summed up in a scathing critique written by a one time President of the Union of American Hebrew congregations of American religiosity (and surely equally applicable in our own land): 'Man is the beginning and end of present-day American religiosity - God is made to serve, or rather to subserve man, to subserve his every purpose and enterprise whether it be economic prosperity, free enterprise, security, or peace of mind. God thus becomes an omnipotent servant, a universal bellhop, to cater to man's every caprice: faith becomes a sure-fire device to get what we petulantly and peevishly crave. This reduction of God from master to slave has reached its height, or rather its depth of blasphemy, in the cult of the Man Upstairs - the friendly neighbour-god who dwells in the apartment just above. Call on him any time - especially if you are feeling blue. He does not get the least bit upset with your faults and failings and, as for your sins, not only does he not remember them ... but the very word and concept of sin have been abolished and 'adjustment' or 'non-adjustment' have taken their places.'

23) ***5:1-7***

Here are two further comments on these verses, the first from the Gilcomston Notes, by W. Still: 'These verses have many applications, but in general we should remember that even if we babble before God, and acknowledge either in word or in profession that we are speaking to God, God will take us at our word. Many a one has brought a heap of trouble upon himself by professing or protesting too much before God. Even when we speak soberly in an abandon of loving consecration, God will take us at our word and may carry our word to a grimmer extreme than we ever dreamt of. Two Christian lovers gave themselves singularly to God at a Convention, naturally expecting God to call them to service, but it was to sacrifice He called them: one to die, the other to be left alone. We often dream dreams before God and ask God to realise them for us. This is dangerous: keep within bounds! If we lived less in the worlds of our silly dreams and more in the world of daily life, we would be more content, and more fit for the work He has for us to do now'.

The second comment is by Deitrich Bonhoeffer: 'Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening; but he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon no longer be listening to God either. He will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too. The is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arranged in pious words'.

That is enough food for thought, is it not, for one day!

24) ***5:8-9***

These are thought-provoking verses. The AV rendering of 8b is less than clear and it is better to follow the modern versions. The RSV has 'the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them'. The meaning of 8 seems to be something like this: We are not to be surprised or dismayed when we see injustice and oppression in the world. How should we expect anything else in a fallen world? Not that we are to sit light to it, for it is always the believer's duty to seek to alleviate suffering wherever it is seen; but a certain measure of realism must come into our thinking. There are, after all, more important things - eternal issues - and we must have our priorities right. While it is right and proper for the Church to be deeply committed, and involved in many of the burning social issues of the day, it is always possible to become so involved and committed that even greater issues are neglected. J.B. Phillips utters a timely warning about this when he says that 'today all the emphasis is thrown upon making the most of this life' and that 'even Christianity is only considered seriously in many quarters because of its social implications'. The Church's primary calling - and this must be its priority - is to prepare men for the everlasting habitations, and nothing - not even injustice and oppression, which will always be present in a fallen world - must be allowed to deflect us from that awesome purpose. If we take the RSV rendering of 9, 'But all in all, a king is an advantage to a land with cultivated fields' it appears to be a word commending the concept of monarchy, something that is held at a discount today, even an anachronism. But royalty, with all its faults, is surely infinitely better than the dismal substitutes offered today - the heroes (?) of the sports and television and pop worlds that receive such adulation from young and old alike. Feet of clay indeed! If we must have something to look up to - and we do - let us show some ambition!

25) ***5:10-20***

In these verses the Preacher comes once again to the subject already broached in 4:1-3, the injustice and oppression he has found in human relationships. It is the consideration of the oppression of officialdom, mentioned in 8, that leads him to speak of the emptiness and vanity of riches and their essentially illusory nature, instancing particularly the misery of the miser. What we need to recognise about 'loving silver' (10), is that you do not need to have it to love it. What is said here is just as true of the 'have-nots' as the 'haves'. The reason why there is no satisfaction in this is, as we have already seen in 3:11, that God has set eternity in our hearts, and it takes something infinitely more than silver to satisfy that deep. Furthermore, to love it means that it insensibly gets a grip on you, awakening an insatiable lust within. But a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses, although the assumption here is that it does. The problem can sometimes be translated into practical terms as follows: it is one thing to be in a trade or profession that you like and enjoy, and you find it well-paid and lucrative, with good prospects; but it is quite another to choose a particular profession simply because it has good prospects financially. This breeds a race of opportunists, with an eye on the main chance; and it is fundamentally immoral, and morally destructive of the best things in human personality. Well might the Psalmist say, 'If riches increase, set not your heart upon them' (Psalm 62:10). Paul's warning words in 1 Timothy 6:9, 10, 17 are also very much to the point.

26) ***5:10-20***

There is a certain whimsical humour in the contrast presented in these verses between the rich and the poor in 11 and 12. The possession of wealth, we are told, can often be a dubious blessing, for wealth brings all sorts of worries with it, and responsibilities too that may prove more than irksome. The business executive is open to far greater stress than the labouring man, and much more liable to stress illnesses. It is the labourer who sleeps the sleep of sweet content, little though he may have of this world's goods; it is the businessman who lies awake at night worrying himself to death about financial issues. Another of the dangers in amassing wealth is dealt with in 13ff, that of becoming a miser and here the whimsical note takes a sharper and more devastating edge as the falsity and the sad foolishness of hoarding wealth for its own sake is mercilessly exposed. The story is told about a simple man who went to a very rich miser and begged him to show him his hoards of gold. Rather unwillingly the miser displayed them and the simple man said, 'Thank you very much. Now I am as rich as you are'. The miser looked at him pityingly, saying, 'What makes you say that?', to which the simple man replied, 'Well, all you do is look at it, and now that I have looked at it too, I am as rich as you are'. He had a point, to be sure; for the miser had little joy of his riches if, as 17 seems to indicate, he economised even on the cost of providing light in his home. He was a sick man indeed!

27) ***5:18-20***

The note struck in the final verses of the chapter is a characteristic one in Ecclesiastes. What is being said is that although power and wealth are illusory as goals of human life there is the possibility of enjoyment, even the imperative command from God that man should find a relative happiness and meaning in work, home and companionship. The good things of the world are God's gifts to be enjoyed by us with thankfulness and contentment. It is only when we make them the goals in life that we go wrong. The great secret is detachment: limited and relative satisfaction, never looking for this in what can never give it. We are not to expect too much of these things or even of life itself. This being so, ascetic renunciation as such does not figure in the Christian scheme of things. To be sure, there is a Christian asceticism, which is expressed in New Testament terms in taking up the cross and following Christ; but this is very different from the kind of attitude sometimes adopted almost instinctively, even unconsciously, about the Christian life which seems to suggest that the one thing that is forbidden is really to enjoy yourself and that if something enjoyable were to present itself the almost automatic reaction would be, 'It can't be God's will, it would be too pleasant'. But what a calumny this is on the living, loving, happy God of the Scriptures! We should pay far more heed than we sometimes do to Paul's teaching in, for example, 1 Timothy 4:4 'Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving' - this said in the context of an asceticism that Paul refused to countenance, and 1 Timothy 6:17, 'God giveth us richly all things to enjoy'. To live in this spirit, content with the good things that God is pleased to give us, not making the mistake of thinking they can ever meet our deepest needs - for that is possible only in God Himself - this is the real secret of life.

28) ***6:1-12***

This is really a very gloomy chapter which well illustrates the central theme of the book - 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity', but we should bear in mind the Preacher's central purpose, namely that he is meeting man 'under the sun' on his own ground, as he says, 'This is all there is to life'. The Preacher has said, 'Very well, I will accept your premise for the moment; let us see where it leads us'. And this is where it leads - the gloom and despair evident in these verses. The phrase 'common among men' in 1 is translated in the RSV as 'it lies heavy upon men', a graphic rendering and one which serves to emphasise the depths and pathos of the problem which he proceeds to describe in 2. We can read two possibilities into what he says here: we may think, for example, of a sick man with everything material that he could wish for, but no health to enjoy it, or even a man whose life is turning to ashes because of sorrow. Death lays its icy hand on kings, as the poet says. In this respect what we are confronted with is the mystery of life: a man who humanly speaking has everything to live for, and he is not allowed to live. This is a problem beyond human understanding. On the other hand, we may think of a man with a sick mind, corroded with discontentment, suffering from jaundice of the soul, never satisfied because he is out of joint with himself and out of sorts with God. In 3 and 4, the two major signs in the Hebrew economy of divine favour - children and length of days - are given a blunt challenge: if life is void of meaning, neither of these is a blessing, but a curse. An untimely birth or even non-existence is better than unending life that does not have an ultimate purpose to it. It is not length of days, but quality that counts; and a man can live to more purpose in 25 years than another may do in ninety.

29) ***6:1-12***

The question that this chapter asks us all is, 'Does our life have meaning?' This is not to ask whether our life is humdrum, for a humdrum life - as we use the term - can be very meaningful indeed. It is a great mistake to suppose that life has to be full of thrills and excitement in order to be meaningful. Indeed, the craving for excitement can itself be an evidence of an inner disorder. Susannah Wesley's life was very humdrum - it could hardly have been anything else with the large brood of children she brought up, but it was a very purposeful life, and who shall estimate the sheer worth of it in spiritual and eternal terms? There are many such unsung heroes of the faith, whose lives have been in the sight of God of incomparable worth. The wonderful thing about the Christian gospel is that it saves us into meaning. To be separate from God robs life of all meaning, because He is the source of all meaning. And to be saved from sin is to be saved also at the same time from meaninglessness and therefore despair, and into Purpose. This is why Ecclesiastes is regarded as a book which points forward and leads on in thought to the coming of the Christian gospel. And it is when we come to an end of ourselves, in the sheer vanity and emptiness of life, that we are ready to receive the message that alone can deliver us from such despair.

30) ***6:1-12***

The thought expressed in 9 is an intriguing one. One of the things that the phrase 'the wandering of the desire' seems to suggest is that it is possible to 'day-dream' our lives away in wishful thinking and fantasy. But this does not merely make our lives feckless; it can also lead us into peril and danger. It has well been said that Eve took the forbidden fruit a hundred times in her imagination before she reached out her hand to take it, and if temptation and opportunity were ever to come together we would be in deep trouble. There is something else also. Was it R.L. Stevenson who said, 'It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive'? This may be true if the arriving falls flat. Have we ever noticed how in life, anticipation and retrospect always seem to be more attractive than reality? We plan our summer holiday, look forward to it for months, but so often the reality falls short of the expectation. Yet, looking back upon it, we think wistfully of the lovely time we had and long to recapture it. The reason for this perplexing paradox in our experience is that of course the present has a shadow upon it: shadows fall on brightest hours, and thorns remain, so that earth's bliss may be our guide, and not our chain. This is a great and very necessary lesson for us to learn, for it underlines for us the danger of setting too great store by any anticipated joy. The wandering of the desire, although it can be wonderfully fascinating, can be morally destructive and disintegrative, because it saps moral energy. What realism there is in the Preacher's words!

31) ***7:1-14***

The connection of this chapter with what precedes it seems to lie in what is said in 6:12, 'Who knoweth what is good for man in this life?', for this question is taken up in these verses, with 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11 all beginning in the Hebrew with the word 'better. Here is a collection of proverbs, wise sayings, enshrining the wisdom the Preacher has gathered over the years. At first sight, these seem to be filled with pessimism, even cynicism and despair, yet is this how we are to understand them? Do we understand them best when we understand them thus? Hardly. We have noticed the Preacher's realistic approach to life, and this, it seems, is the key to understanding what he is saying. After all, we have already seen how cheerful and detached he really is, and how he encourages us to rejoice in the good things of life. He can hardly be regarded, therefore, as contradicting that in what he now goes on to say. Rather, it is his realism that is coming through. For example, in the opening verses, and especially in 3, 4, the point he is making is that sorrow is nearer to reality than feasting. What he is doing is setting forth a wisdom of life which takes account of the great negatives - adversity, sorrow, death. And it is unthinking laughter, superficial gaiety, that are contrasted with a more serious view of life. And, paradoxically, it is precisely people who have taken, and do take, life seriously - and the world, and experience, and themselves, and God - who can really learn true merriment and gladness. Conversely, those who do not are empty and vain; and anything, surely, is better than that.

32) ***7:1-14***

What is being said is this: You have to think out a philosophy of life that will take into consideration the stubborn facts of human experience. You just cannot leave sorrow, adversity, death, out of the reckoning, turning a blind eye to them as if they did not exist. It is profoundly unrealistic to do so; for adversity, sorrow, death itself will ultimately knock at every door; and if they have not been reckoned upon, life will be shattered, and shown to be the foolish thing it is. Stuart Barton Babbage in his remarkable book 'The Mark of Cain' deals in one of its chapters with 'The Enigma of Death' in which he quotes a modern writer as saying that 'The fact of death is the great human repression, the universal "complex". Dying is the reality that man dare not face, and to escape which he summons all his resources ... death is muffled up in illusions'. He refers to the fact that in the 19th century the processes of birth and reproduction were never mentioned in polite society, whereas the processes of death were an accepted subject of ordinary conversation. By contrast, however, today, the processes of death are seldom mentioned in polite society except in euphemisms, whereas the processes of birth and reproduction are a matter of compulsive preoccupation and anxious concern. Our grandparents, in their embarrassment and self-consciousness over the facts of birth, said that babies were found under gooseberry bushes, and we, in our self-consciousness over the facts of death, speak of 'passing on'. He quotes Arthur Koestler as saying that 'morticians (undertakers) endeavour to transform the dead, with lipstick and rouge, into horizontal members of a perennial cocktail party', and that 'this horrid pantomime is due to the fact that there has been a flight from the tragic facts of existence'. The fact of the matter is that without any certainty about the life to come, modern man finds the facts of death and physical decomposition too horrible to contemplate, let alone to discuss or describe. This is what life under 'the sun' is like. How much better, then, to view life from a transcendent perspective!

33) *7:1-14*

In 5-9 the message seems to be that instruction is better than foolish banter. There are few things more sad than the spectacle of a man who seems incapable of being serious about anything, and who gains the reputation of being shallow and superficial in everything he says. The graphic metaphor in 6 underlines this very scathingly, and with justification. Infinitely better to receive the rebuke of a wise man, unpleasant and painful as it may be, than to be exposed to the affront of a hail-fellow-well-met's idle and empty pleasantry. In 10 we need to recognise that not all looking back 'to the good old days' is wrong (as witness Jeremiah's moving words in Jeremiah 6:16, about asking for the old paths), but it can so easily become so by having a wrong attitude to life, when we simply sentimentalise and wear rose-coloured spectacles and therefore fail to recognise realities. In 11 the AV margin reads 'wisdom is as good as an inheritance', and this seems to be borne out by what is said in 12 about wisdom giving life to those who have it. The Preacher's philosophy comes out very clearly in 14: we are to enjoy life when the sun shines upon us, but when adversity comes we are to learn its lessons. God has His purpose for both prosperity and adversity and we must be careful not to miss the lessons of either, but learn from both alike. And it is simply unrealistic to assume that we will not have our share of both in the course of our lives.

34) *7:15-29*

The statements in 15-17 seem to belong together. On the one hand 15 underlines the inscrutable mysteries of life, and it seems to be in face of these that the sentiments expressed in 16 and 17 are made. Their message is to avoid fanaticism at either extreme. Even the extremely good meets the element of chance, and cannot exclude the possibility of tragedy (15). Therefore why court disaster? This is wisdom 'under the sun', and there is surely a higher wisdom, that explains the high devotion and dedication of lives given over utterly to the service of Christ. What would we have to say about the Apostle Paul, if 16 were to be the norm for one's life? All the same, we can glean another kind of message from these verses, which is that merely human righteousness (i.e. 'under the sun') can become self-righteousness and can lead to all sorts of ugly and distressing manifestations, feeding a voracious self that has refused to die the death that leads to true life. As such, there is little to choose between it and human wickedness (17). In this sense, the warning to avoid fanaticism is fairly timely, for the need to keep such impulses as we have described within bounds is very real. The relentless drive that one sees in some souls may sometimes own far more to basic psychological maladjustment and to the restlessness of a raging 'super-ego' within than to any really genuine spiritual dedication. How far removed from all this was the Apostle Paul when he spoke of his detachment and contentment in Philippians 4:11ff!

35) *7:15-29*

The Preacher picks up once again in 19ff the theme of wisdom (11ff), and continues it to the end of the chapter. The wisdom of learning not to expect absolute integrity and probity from any man (21, 22), in view of the fact that we have no kind of right to expect from others a perfection we do not show in our own lives, is set over against what is said in 23ff about the partial nature of all human accomplishments. Finite man cannot encompass the infinite, and this inevitably means that there are some mysteries for which he can find no answer. He must therefore be content not to know, and since ultimate wisdom cannot be found, and practical wisdom all that he can reach, he must come to terms with such a situation. It is open to question whether the Preacher, in what he says in these final verses (23ff), does in fact come to terms with it, for a note of disenchantment seems to creep in to what he says, particularly about womankind, and one wonders whether 'under the sun' wisdom has temporarily gained the ascendant in his thinking at this point. The Gilcomston Note on these verses says 'We have no desire to disagree with the Preacher, but we wonder if his bitterness about women is not at least partly due to the way he regarded them or treated them. Certainly no happily married Christian is going to talk like this. Did the same man write the last chapter of Proverbs?' At all events, the final statement of the chapter, in 29, reads very graphically: 'God made man upright, but …'. In that word 'but', as George Philip says, there is a recognition of all we mean theologically when we speak of the fall of man. This is the central and fundamental issue, the root from which the bitter fruit outlined in this book comes.

36) *8: 1-17*

Here are further observations in practical wisdom. One needs to read over 1-8 a few times before the gist of their meaning begins to emerge. And what emerges is the concept of ultimate authority, law and order, as vested in and represented by the king: 'Keep the king's commandment' (2), for 'Where the word of a king is, there is power' (4). Some of the phrases used in these verses are obscure, and are capable of different interpretations. Is 1, for example, a general statement about the value of wisdom, and that wisdom transforms a man's face, taking the 'hardness' (RSV), or the boldness, in the sense of impudence, from it? This would make good sense, and it is a very true observation. But scholars think that it may have particular reference to the general theme of the passage, i.e. attitude to authority. It would then mean: 'If you are wise, you will control your facial expression in the presence of the king, whatever you think'. The RSV renders 2 differently from the AV: 'Keep the king's command, and because of your sacred oath be not dismayed', i.e. 'When you think that something is irksome, such as, for example, bad taxes, submit to them. Remember your responsibility as a citizen'. If this is a legitimate rendering, then 3 would mean, in effect, 'Do not offer your resignation when the king is arbitrary in his actions toward you. Restrain yourself, and do not stamp out impulsively'. The phrase in the AV 'Stand not in an evil thing' would then mean 'Do not persist in fruitless argument when some difficult matter arises' for it is the king, after all, who has the final say. In 5, we learn that the wise man will have ability, even when the king is arbitrary and unjust, to know when to act and what to do. Practical wisdom gives a man knowledge of how to time his actions, and a sense of fitness in them. Man, after all, has enough trouble already, without inviting more through open defiance of the king in an out-of-step and inappropriate way (6, 7).

37) *8:1-17*

What was said in yesterday's Note has considerable implications for the spirit of unrest and disorder in our society today. The thesis that is propounded in these verses is: Even if any order of society is authoritarian and even evil (9b), nevertheless loyalty to law and order is preferable to insurrection and anarchy. This, as one scholar says, is a profound challenge to those who identify or confuse change with progress. For all change is not necessarily progress, as we well know, and may yet know, to our cost. In a very perceptive comment on the historical antecedents of this debate a noted theologian says: 'The Reformers gave government and the principle of order an absolute preference over rebellion and political chaos', but adds, 'This tended to ally the Christian Church too uncritically with the centres of power in political life, and tempted it to forget that government is frequently the primary source of injustice and oppression. And Calvin's later answer to this was to remember that it was as important to place the ruler under the judgment of God as to regard him as an instrument of God for checking individual sin'. We may well ask why such an emphasis on submission is made in these verses, but the answer must be because of the reality of what is 'above the sun'. All injustice is bearable, and can be borne, as we have already pointed out in an earlier Note, because it will only last 'till He come'. This is Paul's emphasis in Romans 13, as he sums up his argument in the words 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand'. Thus the real and ultimate cause of the anarchy of our day is the loss of the 'other dimension'. The loss of the religious view of life has led directly and inevitably to what we see in our society today.

38) *8:1-17*

Another 'under the sun' observation follows in 10. The NIV rendering is preferable to the AV here (which see). One commentator says 'The evildoers not only find success in this life, but everybody comes to their funeral, and their evil deeds are forgotten in the very place where they were perpetrated'. This is a familiar problem in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms: 'Why do the wicked prosper?' But another angle is given us in 11ff, where it is made plain that God catches up with men in the end. One recalls the story of a farmer who once wrote to the Press the following letter:

'Dear Sir, - I have been trying an experiment. I have a field of corn which I ploughed on Sunday. I planted it on Sunday. I cultivated it on Sunday. I cut it and hauled it to the barn on Sunday. And I find that I have more corn to the acre than has been gathered by any of my neighbours this October.'

The farmer was sure that the editor could have no answer to the sneer implied in it. But imagine his feelings when in the next issue of the paper he read his own letter in print, and at the end of this, one sentence:

'God does not make full settlement in October.'

In 13, life 'under the sun' for the evil man, even though it may be long, is as a shadow; whereas for the good, even a short life is but the promise and prelude of a long eternity. This surely more than offsets the perplexities and mysteries underlined once again in 14: we do not have the answers to these enigmas; but it is enough for us to know that God does have them, and will ensure that all will be well in the end for those who trust in Him.

39) *8-1-17*

Since there is an ultimate vindication of right, as was indicated at the end of the previous Note, and a visitation on evil, the man of faith can therefore face life, and even enjoy its limited pleasures in detachment of spirit (as Paul did in prison, Philippians 4:11ff), and even laugh at despair. This is the real point in 15 - it is not that the Preacher is advocating a life of empty pleasure - 'eat, drink and be merry' - but rather that there would be a glad acceptance of the good gifts of God in the knowledge that they are simply good gifts, to be enjoyed but not regarded as sources of heart-satisfaction or fulfilment, which can come only in fellowship with God Himself, and that not in this life, but only in the life to come. It is the lesson we have already seen at several points in the book, and so beautifully expressed in Adelaide Anne Procter's words:

I thank Thee, Lord, that here our souls,

Though amply blest,

Can never find, although they seek,

A perfect rest,

Nor ever shall, until they lean

On Jesus' breast.

40) ***9:1-18***

An apt title to put at the head of this chapter might be 'Like things happen to all'. Once again it is the inscrutability of life, its essential mystery, that comes home to the Preacher. Life just cannot be neatly 'pigeon-holed'. In 1, the reference is to God's favour or disfavour. A righteous man is not able to tell from his material condition whether he has merited God's approval or not. This is one likely interpretation of the Preacher's words here, although the modern versions incline to the view that it is man's love or hatred that is referred to. One way or the other, however, everything is before us - that is, anything can happen at any time. We do not have control of the events which overtake us, and 'being good' does not guarantee a smiling providence. In 2, it is the apparent lack of discrimination, even arbitrariness, in life that frightens us - one fate comes to all - and we long in vain for a 'simple equation' such as 'If you are good you will prosper, if you are bad you will suffer'. But this is not how it is in life: the hurdles and hazards are the same for good and bad alike. There is an essential element of mystery about life that we cannot understand. The Preacher is not really being pessimistic here, like the Existentialist philosophers who speak of the 'implacable absurdity of the universe', he is merely recognising a fact. He does not deny meaning to life, but simply saying that 'under the sun' man cannot find that meaning. To the man with access to the 'higher dimension' it is not meaningless: he knows there is a reason for things, though he may not see it, and may never see it, in this life. He knows it is there and therefore can live with it, in peace. There is no need therefore to capitulate to despair because there are things we cannot understand in the world. We should compare and contrast the empty and futile 'hope' of life 'under the sun' (4) with Paul's great utterance in 1 Corinthians 15:19ff, 'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.'

41) ***9:1-18***

The Preacher's philosophy of practical realism in view of the inscrutable nature of life and its mysteries - take life as it is, riddles and all, and enjoy it as the gift of God - is really very impressive, with its notion of 'relative happinesses'. As has already been noted, there is no thought here of cynical abandonment to pleasure, but rather a conscious acceptance of God's gifts to His creatures. In 10 the emphasis is not so much on thoroughness and diligence in one's tasks as on urgency: 'Do what you can whilst you have the might or power to do it'. It is the note expressed in the old hymn 'Work for the night is coming'. Life is short and fleeting and, as C.S. Lewis says somewhere, it is surprising how quickly a man comes to the point in life where he finds himself saying, 'No time for that now'. We are to be up and doing. The inscrutability of the ways of God is again the theme in 11, 12: in sport, in battle, in business and in social relationships, success does not always come to the deserving, or where one would expect. 'Time and chance' - the element of contingency in all human affairs - are often unrelated to the skill and worth of those involved. As we sometimes say, 'You never can tell'. The final verses of the chapter, 13ff, illustrate the theme of unrewarded and unappreciated wisdom. The point being made is: life is like that, and always will be. We can never absolutely change it, and must therefore be content with very partial achievements and very partial understanding. This is a bitter pill for idealists to swallow, who will never concede that it must always be like that. But the truth is that when the most has been done that can possibly be done to change society, injustices will still remain, and there will still be an irrational surd at the heart of things. Jesus' own words, 'The poor ye have always with you' bears witness to this blunt realism underlined by the Preacher. The best of our efforts will always be very partial in their effect, and we need to accept the inevitable and come to terms with it.

42) ***10:1-20***

The familiar theme of wisdom and folly is taken up once again in this chapter, but the chapter division would have been better made at the end of 9:16, for 9:17, 18 form an introduction to what follows. The meaning of 17 appears to be that even when a wise man is speaking quietly, he speaks to more effect than one who shouts like a ruler among fools. There is an inherent power in wise words, which can get through to people, almost in spite of themselves. Yet, paradoxically, although the qualities of wisdom are so outstanding (18), they are so often at a discount compared with human folly. One fool can do so much harm and undo so much wisdom simply by opening his mouth. As the Good News Bible renders 10:1, 'A little stupidity can cancel out the greatest wisdom'. As one commentator has put it 'Wisdom is excellent, but it is at a disadvantage in comparison with folly, which produces proportionately large effects. A little leaven of folly can vitiate a whole lump of wisdom, and a single fool can undo the work of many wise men'. Yet, while this is, alas, humanly speaking, true, it is only the whole truth 'under the sun'. There is another standpoint from which it is seen that folly does not have the last or decisive word. 'Above the sun', there is a higher power at work that can overrule the folly of men unto good. There is a ready illustration of this truth in 2 Kings 4:38-44 and 6:1-7, in the accounts of two miraculous happenings in the ministry of Elisha, in which the foolishness and mistakes of God's people were wonderfully overruled by the power of God. These stories are a great encouragement to us. Who among us has not been a victim to over-zealousness on occasion, and even stupidity, that has been like to mar a great deal of work! How thankful we should be that our Lord can overrule both accidental mistakes and ill-advised foolishness!

43) ***10:1-20***

The meaning in 4 seems to be, in the words of one commentator,

'When folly manifests itself in high places the course of wisdom is patience and conciliation. Least said is soonest mended. If it be argued that this would justify a policy of appeasement, the Preacher would answer that the wise man is guided by time and judgment. There is a time to keep silent, and a time to speak (3:7) …. The great sins into which he who is the object of the ruler's displeasure may fall are treason, insubordination, and self-destruction - making common cause with those who are disenchanted, the drawing of others into inevitable ruin. All these sins, patience avoids, and puts a check to them'. There seems to be a common theme running through 5-8. Is it the exasperation, disenchantment and reaction against foolish and ill-advised rulers (cf the oppression exercised by Rehoboam following Solomon's death) that might incite the rebellion? And is it this that is warned against in 8ff? One commentator suggests that the meaning is that no change can be effected without risk, and anyone who interferes with established institutions is liable to get his fingers burned. Before embarking on any such enterprise, therefore, it is better to count the cost, and make sure one has adequate skill and resources at one's command (cf Luke 14:28ff). Again we see the realism of the Preacher. There is no starry-eyed and sentimental attitude, no rose-coloured spectacles here!

44) *10:1-20*

Delitzsch, however, makes the comment (on 8-11) that 'The sum of these four clauses is certainly not merely that he who undertakes a dangerous matter exposes himself to danger; the author seems to say, in this series of proverbs which treat of the distinction between wisdom and folly, that the wise man is everywhere conscious of his danger, and guards against it'. It is true that what is difficult may expose one to danger, that what is improper is likely to bring trouble and that what is done too late is of little use to anyone - the Good News rendering of 11 is very graphic, 'Knowing how to charm a snake is of no use if you let the snake bite first' - but the exercise of wisdom is the great safeguard, for 'wisdom is profitable to direct' (10b). The theme of folly continues in 11b-15, in a series of aphorisms. Folly is notoriously talkative, and although it may begin with simple foolishness it can end with 'mischievous madness', and can do a great deal of harm before it finishes. The fool will confidently pronounce on the most baffling mysteries of life, blandly pontificating, when anyone with a modicum of sense and wisdom knows that there are no easy answers available to man and there is nothing more wearisome (15) than listening to someone who thinks he knows everything. The curious phrase in 15 'he knoweth not how to go to the city' is regarded by commentators as a proverbial expression, to the effect that the fool would get lost even on a plain road. One naturally thinks of the contrasting word in Isaiah 35:8, 'The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein' - because their minds and hearts have been illuminated by the gracious Spirit of God, from 'above the sun'. That is the essential difference between wisdom and folly.

45) *10:1-20*

The contrast presented in 16 and 17 between woe and blessedness requires us to interpret 16 as a scathing criticism of irresponsible living in high places. Ill fares the land, it means, when the court is given over to pleasure and luxury. The reference to the king being a child may refer to the fact that the real power is in the hands of a Prince Regent, as was frequently the case in the history of the kings of Judah and Israel, with some disastrous consequences. On the other hand, it could refer to the king being an emotional and psychological juvenile. Eating in the morning is surely a reference to idling at a time when men should be up and doing their duty at work. In contrast, 17 speaks of a very different situation, when the king's character and nobility are of a quality consistent with his birth. The reference in 18 takes us back to 16: such an attitude and behaviour on the part of those 'at the top' spells ruin for the nation. The chapter closes (20) with a warning against incurring unnecessary risks, through unwise talk, and this bears out the needfulness of the Preacher's earlier warning in 5:2 'Let thy words be few'. There seems to be a link here with what is said in the chapter about the fool who is full of words and generally apt to be saying the wrong thing, but the verse also contains a salutary warning about the danger of what we sometimes call 'tittle-tattle'. We may say something in confidence, within an intimate circle of friends and are later dismayed to discover that it has somehow been passed on and become common knowledge. The phrase we sometimes hear used is, 'A little bird told me', and we see from what is said here how old this saying is. But we are so slow to learn, are we not?

46) *11:1-10*

In the two final chapters of the book, the Preacher's higher wisdom comes right through and into the open. We said at the beginning of our studies that he was meeting man on his own ground, the man who says 'This life is all that there is to life and there is nothing more beyond it', and his reply to such a man is: 'Very well, I will meet you there on your own ground, and accept your premise. Let us see then what happens: all is vanity'. This has been the key to an understanding of all the gloom, cynicism, meaninglessness and despair that we have seen in past chapters, interspersed though they have been with glimpses and gleams of a higher wisdom from 'above the sun'. It is as if the Preacher had been saying, 'If that is what you make of life it is true that there is nothing but vanity for you. But now I show you a more excellent way: in view of all that we have said, and all that we have discovered, about the inscrutable mysteries of life and experience, let me now point you to an infinitely more hopeful alternative, an alternative to cynicism and despair on the one hand, and an empty and vain seeking of pleasure on the other.'

In what remains of the book, the Preacher says, in the main, three things (this follows the helpful and perceptive analysis given by Derek Kidner, as he underlines the positive and instructive reaction the Preacher advocates to the changes and chances that God has ordained for us, 'Redeeming the time, for the days are evil'): (i) Be venturesome (11:1-6): Don't think these things are final. Be active. Spend and be spent, instant in season, out of season. The situation is stimulating, not paralysing; (ii) be joyful (11:7-10) - but with a responsible joy, sobered by the thought of judgment; (iii) be godly (12:1-14). Because youth is so fleeting, opportunity to serve God is to be grasped, not missed. Beauty fades, strength ebbs, and life itself says to us, 'This is not your rest'.

47) *11:1-10*

We take up first of all the theme 'Be venturesome' (1-6). We are not to let the uncertainties of life, or the instability of human happiness paralyse us and reduce us to a dull, lifeless cynicism. There is so much in life that is different. The well-known words in 1, 2 'Cast thy bread upon the waters' can be taken in several ways, and probably should be. They are certainly applicable to acts of charity and their exhortation to us is, be generous, not niggardly, and do not limit that charity, but give to all who need it. As an interpretation, this makes very good sense and in this respect it stands over against the attitude that cynicism so often breeds - the 'I'm-all-right-Jack' syndrome, which simply means looking after 'Number one', and nobody else matters. And the Preacher is saying to us, 'Don't let life with its inscrutabilities and mysteries turn you into a person like that, only concerned with yourself. Be a man with a generous heart'.

But the words can also be applied in terms of commercial enterprise. Indeed, the original imagery is generally regarded as belonging to commercial enterprise, and referring to the sea-borne corn trade of ancient times. What is being said is, 'Don't let the uncertainties of business paralyse you: nothing venture, nothing win'. He who will not venture until he has an absolutely safe proposition will wait forever (4). It is true that there are risks in business, but the course of wisdom is not to put all your eggs in one basket. Reduce the risk by dividing and diversifying. But don't be paralysed into inactivity by waiting for all the risks to be eliminated. It is impossible for this to be done, because life is unpredictable. There is always the unforeseen but there is such a thing as divine providence, and the guidelines are sure. If God is saying to us, this is the way, walk ye in it, then risks notwithstanding, we may go forward in confidence. Venturing - with God - cannot be wrong.

48) *11:1-10*

There is yet another application of these words, to spiritual categories, and as such they give a good and practical exhortation for spiritual service. Our job is to sow the seed (1, 6); it is God's prerogative to give the increase, the fruit and the harvest. We must therefore be instant in season, out of season. We are not to wait for ideal circumstances in which to serve or witness, for there are no ideal circumstances. Christ thrusts us into situations that are far from ideal and requires us to witness in them. We should remember the parable of the sower. Our Lord gave no guarantee that all the seed would bear fruit, and we must be realistic enough to understand this and accept it, and not be discouraged when our testimony seems to be unavailing. Of course there are difficulties, but then, did we really expect to be 'carried to the sky on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sail the bloody seas'? Could it just be that looking for easy, ideal circumstances, ideal situations, in which to bear witness to Christ is evidence that we have not grown up spiritually or indeed psychologically? Risks? Of course there are risks. Sometimes we are afraid to speak lest we say the wrong thing, but this is an attitude that can paralyse us, and paralysed Christians are no good to anybody. So often, the risk is infinitely worth taking; and even if we do make a mistake the Lord is able, as we have already seen (cf 2 Kings 4 and 6), to overrule our mistakes and turn them to good. Surely this ought to encourage us: nothing venture, nothing win.

49) *11:1-10*

The second theme (7-10) is, 'Be joyful'. But the joy referred to is surely a responsible joy, sobered by the thought of judgment. As they stand, these verses could be taken in two different ways, particularly 9, which seems to have a sting in its tail. This could be interpreted as the word of a sour old man who is 'down' on the youth, as if putting up his hands in horror, he were exclaiming, 'What a terrible way young folk live nowadays, in my young day it was all different. All right, live like that, but God will call you to judgment'. But this is a rather cynical interpretation. It is true that some older people do speak like that. But not this man, for there is no trace of cynicism in his heart. This is the kind of man who would look at long-haired 'weirdoes' with a very real measure of tolerance and recognise, in spite of their appearance, that they were human and had many sterling qualities under their improbable exterior. He is genuinely advocating a life of rejoicing - not advocating profligacy or driving everyone into the hippy camp, but simply advocating that they live life to the full, yet for all that, live in the light of the fact that at the end there is a day of reckoning. After all, enjoyment of the present is all that is given to man. The future is in God's hands. Tomorrow belongs to Him. It is this that conditions the joy and carefree laughter. Life, in all its joys, must be responsibly lived in the here and now. It is not wrong to feel that it is great to be alive when we are young, but the Preacher's realism is very evident when he adds, 'Remember the days of darkness'. Life is to be accounted for. Hence the fine balance in 10, 'Remove sorrow from thy heart and put away evil from thy flesh'. Surely the Preacher is on to something vital here: it is possible to be good without being 'goody-goody', and be sober and responsible without being a 'sober-sides'.

50) ***12:1-14***

The Preacher's third and final emphasis in the last two chapters of the book is: Be godly. This follows directly from what is said in the second injunction, Be joyful, which spoke of a responsible joy, sobered by the thought of judgment. It is the thought and certainty of judgment that underlines all that is said here. As one commentator has put it 'Man is a creature of time. In the end his creatureliness asserts itself unmistakably in his dissolution'. It is therefore wisdom to take cognizance of this, even in youth, the time when one is least disposed to think of such things, when life seems to stretch out forever. It is only when this dimension is accepted that one's youth can be rightly understood and enjoyed, only when the other dimension to life is not only introduced but taken seriously that life can be lived to the full. After all, life apart from God can have no meaning - this has been the substance of the earlier chapters - for God alone can give meaning to it, and if man or the world be regarded as the ultimate standard or point of reference, then all is vanity and leads to despair. This is the principal thrust of the final chapter, and will serve to give both background and context to all that will be said in the Readings that follow.

51) *12:1-14*

We should note how different the Preacher's emphasis is (in terms of what was said in the previous introductory Note) from so much contemporary thinking. It is often said today, 'Time enough to think of these things when conscious of need and of the frailties of age and infirmity' - that is, 'you only need religion to bolster the failing powers of mind and body, not in the days of your strength'. But the very opposite is true, according to the Preacher. It is not a question of remembering our Creator because of a sense of need of Him, but because it is our duty to worship Him and fear His Name. Lesslie Newbigin, in his remarkable book, 'The Other Side of 1984' observes that the difference between mediaeval society and our own time is that mediaeval society emphasised the idea of the duties involved for each person by his or her position within society, whereas from the Enlightenment onwards, it was the 'rights of man' that became axiomatic. The result of this kind of thinking is that the world becomes (as in the contemporary western world it has become) a place where each individual has the 'right' to pursue 'happiness' in the domestic and privatised sense, and it is the responsibility of the state to see that this right is honoured. Well, we see the fruit of this today with a vengeance, when the whole concept of duty has become a dirty word in the human vocabulary, and 'rights' are paramount, even if gaining and maintaining our rights should cause untold damage to individuals and society alike. We should get wise to the ultimate implications of such an attitude, and recognise that it is this that explains the spiralling escalation of violence in the world. What, after all, is terrorism - whether of the IRA or of the Lockerbie bombers or of the animal rights atrocities - but the insistent demand that their particular rights should be established? This is worth thinking about, for there is something very fundamental here.

52) *12:1-14*

In view of what was said in the previous Note, it is clear that the sooner people think about these things the better. Indeed - the Preacher implies - it becomes less easy as time goes on to remember our Creator. All the statistics in fact show that by far the greatest number of Christians become so in earlier years rather than later, in youth rather than in middle or old age. Besides, it is hardly the thing to live the life God has given us without Him, and then in old age hand back the dregs and the ashes to Him. It is hardly a compliment to God to give up the pleasures of life when they have given us up!

The Preacher proceeds to give a picture of old age without God, in the verses which follow, and demonstrates the appalling prospect against which remembering God in youth is the only real safeguard. The language is highly allegorical, and the passage has a rare beauty. The exact application of the allegory may not always be clear, and to press it too minutely and with over specific identification may have the effect of spoiling the general picture which is reasonably clear. What is said in 2, for example, may simply mean 'before the clouds come on' - that is, before the storms begin to blow that will finally drive your frail bark onto the rocks, a reference to the approach of old age and death, and a description of the decay and dissolution of life. Alternatively, it may be a series of metaphorical expressions to describe the faculties of man, with mind and understanding gradually being darkened, and one thing after another denoting the gradual and increasing deterioration in health. In youth, you throw off things relatively easily: sunshine follows clouds when you are young; but when you are old, clouds return after rain, bringing more!

53) ***12:1-14***

The 'evil days' mentioned in 1 are, it seems clear from what follows in 3-7, those of feeble, helpless old age, perceptibly marking the failure of bodily and mental strength. They are described in these later verses as the years of which one has to say, 'I have no pleasure in them'. Delitzsch thinks that the attempts made by commentators to interpret the allegorical references have been for the most part unfortunate. Reading too much detail into allegory is an occupational hazard for commentators - as witness the often arbitrary assertions made in the interpretation of prophetic literature - but it is surely legitimate to see a general picture of old age in these verses, with the faculties of body and mind steadily deteriorating until elderly folk become the merest shadow of what they once were, before finally going to their 'long home'. The end of life is spoken of first in terms of the silver cord suspending a lamp from the ceiling being loosed and the golden bowl containing the oil falling and being shattered, and then in terms of the pitcher being broken at the fountain, and the wheel bringing up the water container being broken at the well. It is a mistake, in our view, to read more literal detail into these word pictures than the poetic and allegorical nature of the writing warrants (just as it destroys the beauty of, say, Wordsworth's poetry - clouds are not really lonely, and daffodils do not really dance, and it does not help our understanding and appreciation of his delightful poem to think they do). But the truth with which the allegory closes in 7 is not in dispute, and death does mean a reckoning with God. And if we are not rightly related to Him, then all is vanity indeed.

54) ***12:1-14***

The epilogue with which the book of Ecclesiastes concludes serves to sum up and encapsulate the message of the whole book, and does so in a simple but profound utterance in 13, 'Fear God, and keep His commandments ' We should note that whereas the Preacher has himself been speaking throughout the book, here his scribe speaks of him in the third person, and we find ourselves in cordial agreement with what he says of him in these verses, for the Preacher's wisdom has come over very clearly in these chapters (9); the truth of what he has said, and the acceptability of his presentation of it has been marked by integrity (10), even when it has come over with a sharp cutting edge on occasion (11), pricking and hurting us, and galvanising us, as it was intended to do. It is always the teaching of those that are really in touch with God that gives stability and strength of life, for they are drawing from the true fountainhead of life, in contrast to the volubility of would-be dispensers of wisdom. The books purveyed by many of these should not have time wasted in reading them, for the good reason that they should never have been written in the first place (12). The two final verses of the chapter have a significance of their own and we shall look at them in more detail in the next Reading.

55) ***12:1-14***

It is a misunderstanding to suppose that the statement 'Fear God, and keep His commandments' is an expression of a religion of law, even legalism, that falls short of the New Testament doctrine of grace. For one thing, such an attitude seems to suggest that 'grace' is a concept confined to the New Testament. But this is wide of the mark, for the Old Testament itself is full of grace, beginning indeed with grace, with 'law' entering in as a later, contingent factor. The theologian, Emil Brunner, in the concluding chapter of his book, 'The Mediator', asserts that the whole gospel of Jesus Christ is the exposition of the First Commandment: 'I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have none other gods but Me', and adds 'Whenever anyone really listens to the First Commandment and admits its reality, he already possesses the whole truth that the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ contain. The whole message of the Church, if it be a true message, simply aims at intensifying the force of this First Commandment. The Church has no other task. This includes all her teaching, both in dogma and in ethics. When this commandment is obeyed, then all is well with her both in her faith and in her active life. But all is not well with the Church when she thinks this is not sufficient; when she says that this commandment is only law, and what matters most is that the Gospel shall be preached. There is no other Gospel than this law itself.' Later in the chapter, Brunner adds: 'It is a terrible misunderstanding, the worst, the most subtle fraud ever perpetrated in the Name of God, if we think that everything does not depend upon this obedience, if we hold that through faith in the Mediator in justification, this obedience has become either superfluous or a secondary matter. Faith is obedience - nothing else - literally nothing else at all.'

This is how we must understand the closing words in Ecclesiastes; and when they are thus understood, they point its message right on to the New Testament gospel. The announcement of a tribunal in 14, the commentator Ellicott remarks, 'at which "every work", "every secret thing", shall be brought into judgment, cannot be reasonably understood of anything but a judgment after this life; so that this book, after all its sceptical debatings, ends by enunciating, more distinctly than is done elsewhere in the Old Testament, the New Testament doctrine of a day when God shall judge the secrets of men (Romans 2:16), shall bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart (1 Corinthians 4:5)'.