

Ecclesiastes (The Preacher)

Reflections of a Royal Philosopher

- ¹The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- ²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- ³What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
- ⁴A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.
- ⁵The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
- ⁶The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
- ⁷All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
- ⁸All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
- ⁹What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
- ¹⁰Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
- ¹¹The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them.

The Futility of Seeking Wisdom

12 I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

¹⁵What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.' ¹⁷And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

¹⁸For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

The Futility of Self-Indulgence

2 I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity. ²I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' ³I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; ⁵I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹**Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it,**

and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Wisdom and Joy Given to One Who Pleases God

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

¹⁴The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. ¹⁵Then I said to myself, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity. ¹⁶For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? ¹⁷So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, ²¹because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Everything Has Its Time

3For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

The God-Given Task

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Judgement and the Future Belong to God

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. ¹⁷I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. ¹⁸I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are

but animals. ¹⁹For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? ²²So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

4 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. ²And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; ³but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

4 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

⁵Fools fold their hands
and consume their own flesh.

⁶Better is a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with toil,
and a chasing after wind.

7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling', they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

The Value of a Friend

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

13 Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. ¹⁴One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. ¹⁵I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king; ¹⁶there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Reverence, Humility, and Contentment

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. ²Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

3 For dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words.

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow. ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it. ⁶Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands?

7 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.

8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. ⁹But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a ploughed field.

10 The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

11 When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

12 Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep.

13 There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt,¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands.¹⁵ As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.¹⁶ This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind?¹⁷ Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

18 This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot.¹⁹ Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God.²⁰ For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

The Frustration of Desires

6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind:² those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill.³ A man may beget a hundred children, and live for many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.⁴ For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered;⁵ moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he.⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to one place?

7 All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied.⁸ For what advantage have the wise over fools? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living?⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are

stronger. ¹¹The more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better? ¹²For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?

A Disillusioned View of Life

7 A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death, than the day of birth.

²It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting;
for this is the end of everyone,
and the living will lay it to heart.

³Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.

⁴The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

⁵It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.

⁶For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of fools;
this also is vanity.

⁷Surely oppression makes the wise foolish,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁸Better is the end of a thing than its beginning;
the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.

⁹Do not be quick to anger,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.

¹⁰Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?'
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

¹¹Wisdom is as good as an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.

¹²For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.

¹³Consider the work of God;
who can make straight what he has made crooked?

14 On the day of prosperity be joyful, and on the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

The Riddles of Life

15 In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. ¹⁶Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? ¹⁸It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both.

19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise more than ten rulers that are in a city.

20 Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.

21 Do not give heed to everything that people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you; ²²your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.

23 All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, 'I will be wise', but it was far from me. ²⁴That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? ²⁵I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. ²⁶I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷See, this is what I found, says the Teacher, adding one thing to another to find the sum, ²⁸which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. ²⁹See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

Obey the King and Enjoy Yourself

8 Who is like the wise man?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

Wisdom makes one's face shine,
and the hardness of one's countenance is changed.

2 Keep the king's command because of your sacred oath. ³Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, 'What are you doing?' ⁵Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm, and the wise mind will know the time and way. ⁶For every matter has its time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them. ⁷Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be? ⁸No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practise it. ⁹All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt.

God's Ways Are Inscrutable

10 Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. ¹¹Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil. ¹²Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, ¹³but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

Take Life as It Comes

⁹All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them ²is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. ³This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹²For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Wisdom Superior to Folly

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed important to me. ¹⁴There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege-works against it. ¹⁵Now there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶So I said, 'Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.'

¹⁷The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one bungler destroys much good.

Miscellaneous Observations

10 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odour;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.

²The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of a fool to the left.

³Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense,
and show to everyone that they are fools.

⁴If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post,
for calmness will undo great offences.

⁵ There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: ⁶folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

⁸Whoever digs a pit will fall into it;
and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake.

⁹Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them;
and whoever splits logs will be endangered by them.

¹⁰If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge,
then more strength must be exerted;
but wisdom helps one to succeed.

¹¹If the snake bites before it is charmed,
there is no advantage in a charmer.

¹²Words spoken by the wise bring them favour,
but the lips of fools consume them.
¹³The words of their mouths begin in foolishness,
and their talk ends in wicked madness;
¹⁴yet fools talk on and on.
No one knows what is to happen,
and who can tell anyone what the future holds?
¹⁵The toil of fools wears them out,
for they do not even know the way to town.

¹⁶Alas for you, O land, when your king is a servant,
and your princes feast in the morning!
¹⁷Happy are you, O land, when your king is a nobleman,
and your princes feast at the proper time—
for strength, and not for drunkenness!
¹⁸Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house leaks.
¹⁹Feasts are made for laughter;
wine gladdens life,
and money meets every need.
²⁰Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich, even in your bedroom;
for a bird of the air may carry your voice,
or some winged creature tell the matter.

The Value of Diligence

11 Send out your bread upon the waters,
for after many days you will get it back.
²Divide your means seven ways, or even eight,
for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.
³When clouds are full,
they empty rain on the earth;
whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

⁴Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.

5 Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Youth and Old Age

7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

8 Even those who live for many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

9 Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement.

10 Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

12 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; ²before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; ³on the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶before the silver cord is snapped,

and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. ⁸Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

Epilogue

⁹ Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. ¹⁰The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly.

¹¹ The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. ¹²Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.