

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



Adventuring Through the Bible

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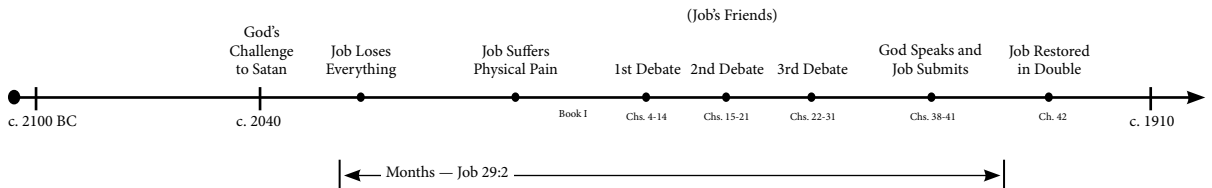
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The Hardest Question



Johnny Gunther was a handsome boy of sixteen. He majored in math and chemistry at Deerfield Academy and was a straight A student when he began having blinding headaches. It didn't take the doctors long to diagnose the problem, Johnny had a brain tumor.

The character of this brave young man was revealed following his first surgery. In the course of that surgery, the doctors discovered that there was really nothing they could do for Johnny. Afterwards, they explained the seriousness of the situation to Johnny's parents, John and Frances Gunther.

"What should we tell Johnny about his condition?" they asked.

"He's so bright and so curious about all that's happening to him," the surgeon replied. "He really wants to know everything, so I think we should be honest with him."

The Gunthers agreed, so the surgeon went to Johnny alone in his hospital room and explained to him the seriousness of his brain tumor. The boy listened attentively and then asked, "Doctor, how shall we break it to my parents?"

Even after a second operation, Johnny

passed the grueling entrance examinations for Columbia University. Two weeks after being accepted to Columbia, Johnny died.

Johnny Gunther was a young man with so much promise, so much to live for. Why did such a terrible thing—brain cancer—invade his life? That question echoes the tough, painful questions we encounter in the book of Job.

"Why, Lord?"

Job is poetry, and it is an epic drama not unlike the Greek poetic dramas of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. But the book of Job is also history as Job was an actual, living person. These events took place and are recounted for us in a beautiful literary style so that we might have an answer to the age-old question, "Why does tragedy invade our lives?"

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to reveal hidden dimensions of practical truth contained in the story of the suffering Old Testament saint, Job. It seeks to answer such questions as: Why do we suffer? Where is God in our times of suffering? Why does He sometimes seem to be silent? What is the best way to be a friend to someone who is suffering?

LEFT: Dead Sea

Whenever you find yourself going through pain and trials, whenever you cry out, “Why, Lord?” open the book of Job. Here is a man who experienced agony, loss, and desolation of spirit beyond our ability to comprehend. Job asks questions of God, seeks answers from God, becomes angry with God—yet he remains faithful, and God brings him through his time of trial.

The ultimate answer to the “Why” question is given at the beginning of the book. In the opening scenes of Job, we learn the background of Job’s drama—information that Job himself doesn’t have. The answer to the great “Why?” question is this: Senseless suffering arises from Satan’s continual challenge to the government of God.

As the book opens, we find God meeting with the angels. Among them is Satan, who strides in swaggering, convinced that self-interest is humanity’s only motivator. In the presence of God, Satan asserts that anyone who claims to be motivated in some other way is a phony. In fact, Satan claims he can prove it. God responds by selecting a man named Job to be the battleground.

Battle is the appropriate description of what takes place in the book of Job. I compare it to the battles that shaped the outcome of World War II.

On December 7, 1941, a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii brought the United States into that war. At the beginning of the conflict between Japan and the United States, it looked as though the war would be waged in the middle of the Pacific, around the Hawaiian Islands. But early on, events took a sudden turn. Without warning, the theater of battle shifted abruptly to the South

Pacific, several thousands of miles beyond Hawaii. Americans began to hear of islands with strange-sounding names like Guam, Guadalcanal, Wake Island, Luzon, and Bataan. In those remote corners of the earth, the greatest powers on Earth were locked in mortal combat. These islands became the arena for the great conflict between empires.

This is similar to what takes place in the story of Job. Here is a man going about his business, unaware that he has suddenly become the center of God’s attention—and Satan’s, too. Like tiny Guam or remote Wake Island, there is nothing special about Job, but his life becomes a battleground in the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, between good and evil. Job is ground zero, and Satan is about to begin his first major assault.

Tragedies Piled upon Catastrophes

In chapter 1 we see that, one by one, all the supports are yanked from Job’s life—one tragedy after another, any one of which would be nearly unendurable. First, his wealth was taken from him. Then all of Job’s oxen were stolen by enemy raids and his donkey herds were decimated. His sheep are killed in a storm. His vast herd of camels—true wealth in the world of the Middle East—were wiped out.

Finally comes the most heartbreaking news of all: Job’s seven sons and three daughters are together in one home, enjoying a birthday celebration, when a tornado strikes, demolishing the house and killing all of Job’s children at once.

While reeling from his losses, Job—a man of great faith and faithfulness to his Lord—seeks to respond in faith. “Naked I came from

my mother's womb," he says, "and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

Satan is taken aback by Job's response. He was sure that the massive assault he had launched against Job would be enough to destroy his faith. Job's continuing attitude of praise has dealt Satan a stinging setback. So Satan goes back to God and wants Him to change the rules of the game. Satan has decided to attack Job more directly and petitions God for the right to strike Job's own body. God agrees, and without warning Job is suddenly stricken with a series of terrible boils.

When I was younger, I experienced within an eighteen month period a series of boils on my body—no more than two or three at a time, and probably around twenty-five altogether. Since that time, I have had deep sympathy for dear old Job. Nothing is more aggravating than a painful boil that no medication can relieve. You can only grit your teeth and endure the agony until the boil heals of its own accord.

Consider how Job must have felt, being stricken with boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. As the pain drags on, his wife turns on him. In Job 2:9, she says, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" Job has to suffer alone, yet he is determined to remain faithful to God.

Job's "Comforters"

Then comes the final test, when Job receives a visit from three of his friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. At Job 2:11 the book

shifts its focus. We now are no longer looking only at Job, but at his controversy with his three friends.

Initially, Job's three friends seem to respond with genuine empathy toward his situation. When they first see him, they weep, tear their clothes, and cover themselves with ashes. Job is so disfigured by his suffering that they hardly recognize him. For seven days and seven nights, they sit with him, not saying a word, because they see how great his suffering is. If they had simply remained that way, silently present, Job would have felt supported and cared for.

But after seven days, these friends break the silence. They go on and on, talking and arguing, piling pious words and judgment onto Job's suffering, magnifying his pain.

From their limited human perspective, Job's three friends attempt to answer that same haunting question, "Why is there suffering in the world?" All three come to the same conclusion. With smug, dogmatic certainty, they agree that Job is afflicted because he has committed a terrible sin. So they proceed to argue with him, trying to break down his defenses and to get him to admit that they are right. Some comfort they are!

Now, it's true that God sometimes uses painful circumstances to get our attention when we have wandered away from Him. And it's true that when we violate the laws of God's universe (for example, by taking illegal drugs, engaging in promiscuous sex, or indulging in gluttonous eating habits), our bodies will have to pay the price in poor health and even intense suffering. But it is also true that bad things sometimes happen to people who have done nothing to bring it on themselves.

The problem with the argument of Job's three miserable "comforters" is that they stubbornly claim that sin is the only possible explanation for Job's sufferings.

Like a boxer who continues to beat on an opponent who's down for the count, Job's friends each take three rounds with him. Each presents three arguments, nine arguments in all, and try various approaches. First they try sarcasm and irony. Then they appeal to Job's honesty. Then they accuse him of specific crimes and misdeeds. Finally they act hurt and go away, miffed and sulking.

Their argument is that if God is just, then the righteous are always blessed and the wicked always suffer. Therefore, Job's pain is the direct result of his sin. It's a tidy, logical explanation—unless you are the one who is suffering. In his book *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey observes that Christians, like Job's friends, often feel that they must find some hidden spiritual reason behind suffering, such as:

"God is trying to teach you something. You should feel privileged, not bitter, about your opportunity to lean on him in faith."

"Meditate on the blessings you still enjoy—at least you are alive. Are you a fair-weather believer?"

"You are undergoing a training regimen, a chance to exercise new muscles of faith. Don't worry—God will not test you beyond your endurance."

"Don't complain so loudly! You will forfeit this opportunity to demonstrate your faithfulness to nonbelievers."

"Someone is always worse off than you. Give thanks despite your circumstances." Job's friends offered a version of each of these words of wisdom, and each contains an element of truth. But the book of Job

plainly shows that such "helpful advice" does nothing to answer the questions of the person in pain. It was the wrong medicine, dispensed at the wrong time.

(PHILIP YANCEY, *DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD*, 181)

At first Job is annoyed with these friends. Then he becomes angry. Finally, he becomes exasperated, replying to them with thick sarcasm. When they urge him to confess his sin, he responds that he can't confess sin that he is unaware of, and he can't think of anything he has done to offend God. Moreover, he no longer believes in justice, since their argument that the wicked always suffer simply isn't true. He points out that many notoriously wicked people actually prosper and flourish—a fact that hasn't changed in thousands of years.

At this point, we see Job's faith sagging under the crushing burden of his suffering. He says that he doesn't know what to do because God won't listen to him. He doesn't even have a chance to plead his case before God, because God hides from him. "If only I knew where to find him," he laments in Job 23:3–4. "If only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments."

Finally, in a boiling rage of confusion and frustration, Job yells at his friends, expressing his terror of the Almighty. "He carries out his decree against me," wails Job, "and many such plans he still has in store. That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him" (Job 23:14–15). Job once thought of God as a reliable Friend. Now his Friend has seemingly turned on him. He is disoriented. Up is down. Right is wrong. White is black.

Job no longer knows what to think about the God he has served all his life. The pain of his suffering is eating away at his mind.

Throughout Job's trial, he is totally honest. Whatever he withstands, whatever he feels, whatever he thinks, he simply lays out the truth of it with blunt candor. He dispatches the pat answers of his friends with the livid contempt those answers deserve. Stripped to his very soul, he cries out again and again with some of the deepest expressions of the human heart. Like Jacob when he wrestled with God's angel, Job is locked in a struggle with God. He is angry, he is afraid, he is confused and sick inside—but he never lets go of God.

At times we see that Job's wrestling with God is rewarded. A ray of light shines in his darkness. In Job 19:25–26, Job says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." Out of this man's deep distress comes a cry that will be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. He is our Redeemer who will make it possible for us to transcend the corruption of death and to stand in the flesh and see God face-to-face.

Elihu—a misunderstood young man

After all of Job's so-called friends have taken a verbal whack at him, a fourth man, Elihu, the youngest of the group, clears his throat and begins to speak. Who is Elihu? I believe he is one of the most misunderstood people in all of Scripture—and I believe his words are the key to understanding the book of Job. This young man deserves closer examination.

The name "Elihu" means "My God is He." Elihu is the son of Barachel (a name that means "God blesses"). Barachel was a Buzite—a citizen of the land of Buz. At the beginning of the book of Job, we see that Job lived in the land of Uz. The lands of Uz and Buz were named for two brothers who lived during the time of Abraham (see Gen. 22:21).

Young Elihu has kept his peace throughout the discussion between Job and his three "comforters" out of deference to the age of the other men. We also know that Elihu was angry. He was not only angry with Job for defending himself, but he was angry with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar because they had condemned Job without evidence.

Some Bible scholars have taken Elihu's anger as proof that the young man was rash, impulsive, and quick-tempered—but I think that view misjudges Elihu. Throughout this long debate, Elihu has listened quietly and patiently. Elihu waits for a lull in the conversation before speaking. Only after Job and his three "comforters" fall silent does Elihu stand and speak. Despite his anger, Elihu speaks courteously and respectfully:

*"I am young in years,
and you are old;
that is why I was fearful,
not daring to tell you what I know.
I thought, 'Age should speak;
advanced years should teach wisdom.'
But it is the spirit in a man,
the breath of the Almighty, that gives
him understanding.
It is not only the old who are wise,
not only the aged who understand
what is right.
"Therefore I say: Listen to me;
I too will tell you what I know.*

*I waited while you spoke,
 I listened to your reasoning;
 while you were searching for words,
 I gave you my full attention.
 But not one of you has proved Job
 wrong;
 none of you has answered his arguments.
 Do not say, 'We have found wisdom;
 let God refute him, not man.'
 But Job has not marshaled his words
 against me,
 and I will not answer him with your
 arguments" (32:6–14).*

Unlike the previous three speakers, Elihu's tone is courteous. In verse 18, he says, "The spirit within me compels me." I believe he refers here to God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, for in verse 8 he says, "it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding." Elihu adds:

*"I will show partiality to no one,
 nor will I flatter any man;
 for if I were skilled in flattery,
 my Maker would soon take me away"
 (32:21–22).*

Elihu wants his hearers to know that he has no intention of showing any favor or disfavor. He only wants to speak according to the will of God, his Maker.

Some Bible commentators understandably regard Elihu as a brash young man, full of the arrogance of youth. Some think Elihu adds nothing to the conversation, but merely repeats the arguments of Job's three "comforters." Others dismiss Elihu's words as a meaningless interruption, noting that God, when He enters the discussion at the

end of the book, seems to take no notice of Elihu at all.

I believe all of these views are mistaken. I don't see Elihu as arrogant or impulsive. His message is distinctly different from that of the three "comforters" in several important respects. And I believe Elihu's argument expresses the very core theme of the book of Job. Here are four important facts about Elihu that are often missed by Bible commentators:

(1) *God does not rebuke Elihu.* At the end of the book of Job, God rebukes Job's three "friends" for their folly in all the things they said to Job:

After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer (42:7–9).

God tells Job's three "friends" that He is angry with them for speaking falsely of Him, and He tells them to offer a sacrifice and have Job pray for them. But God never addresses such a command to Elihu. Why not? Because Elihu is not guilty of speaking falsely of God, as Job's three "comforters" are. The reason the Lord is not angry with Elihu is because Elihu spoke rightly.

(2) *Elihu's message occupies a prominent place in the drama.* He speaks for five chapters. Clearly, this is one of the major discourses in the book. If Elihu had spoken falsely at such length, God would surely have included him in the command to offer sacrifices and seek Job's prayers. The fact that God does not condemn Elihu's message seems to be a tacit endorsement. I believe God approves of Elihu's words as well as his courteous and compassionate spirit.

(3) *Unlike Job's three "comforters," Elihu is sensitive to Job's suffering.* Though Elihu has strong feelings, he controls his emotions and speaks sensitively to Job. This contrasts with the caustic, sarcastic tone of Job's three "friends."

(4) *Elihu claims to speak from revelation, not from age and experience.* This, I believe, is the most important distinctive that separates Elihu from the other three men. I'm reminded of the words of John Wesley: "At present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me." That is Elihu's position.

People often assume that age produces wisdom, but this is not always the case. I know some young people who are wise beyond their years and some old people are ridiculously foolish. Age does not necessarily guarantee wisdom. We who have been "young" for many decades like to think that it is our years and our gray hair that make us wise—but the truly wise know better.

In fact, one of the most profound truths we find in this passage is that *wisdom is something only God can give*. And God can give wisdom to the young as well as to the old. The Bible further tells us that the fear (reverence) of God is the beginning of

wisdom. So if we have true reverence for God and we speak from the wisdom God has given us, then we can be truly wise regardless of our calendar age.

Elihu plays a vitally important role in this story. God uses Elihu to answer Job's cry for an explanation of his suffering. Throughout Job's trial of pain and loss, God has been silent. Job has cried out for help, and no answer has been given. But God often chooses a surprising and unexpected way to answer our prayers. In this case, that answer comes from young Elihu.

Read the words of Elihu with care. If you read attentively, you'll see that, by the end of Elihu's discourse, his words sound similar to the words spoken later by the voice of God. I believe Elihu is truly speaking according to the Spirit of God. Job wanted to hear the message of God, and now at last he hears it—from the lips of wise, young Elihu.

The Answer of the Lord

In chapter 38, the Lord Himself answers Job out of the whirlwind. From the fury of the winds, God comes to him and says:

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (38:2–3).

In other words, "Do you want to debate with Me, Job? First, let Me see your qualifications. I have a list of questions. If you can handle these questions, then perhaps you're qualified to go head-to-head with Me in a debate." Then, in chapters 38 through 40, we find one of the most remarkable sections

in the Bible. God takes Job on a tour of nature and asks him question after question, such as:

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? . . . Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?” (38:4,12).

“Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?” (38:17).

“Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens?” (38:31–33).

“Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?” (38:34–35).

“Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south?” (39:26).

“Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope?” (41:1).

The answer to all these questions is obvious—and humbling. The Lord paints a vast and finely detailed picture of the complex interconnected universe He has created, from Earth’s most delicate and beautiful life-forms to its most awesome and terrifying forces to the distant stars in their constellations. Clearly, only a superintellect could comprehend and direct the full range of creation in all its complexity and power. At the end of this display of God’s power and wisdom, Job in his

smallness can only respond by falling on his face before God:

“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6).

The essence of God’s argument is that life is too complicated for simple answers. If you demand that God give you simple answers to the deep questions of existence, you are asking Him to give you what you could never understand. Trying to take in so much truth would be like trying to take a sip of water from a gushing fire hydrant. So, as finite human beings in the presence of an infinite God, we can only trust Him. We can question Him, and He welcomes our questions—but we are in no position to argue with Him.

God does not exist for people. People exist for God. He is not a glorified waiter who waits for us to snap our fingers so He can ask, “May I take your order?” No, we are God’s instruments and we exist to carry out His purposes. Some of those purposes are so complex and transcendent that we cannot comprehend them on this side of eternity.

As the Book of Job draws to a close, we see what the apostle James referred to when he wrote:

You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy (James 5:11).

In Job 42, God rebukes Job’s “comforters” and has Job pray for them—these stubborn, misguided, self-righteous blunderers who did more harm than good. God then restores

everything Job lost—and doubles it. Job had 7,000 sheep before; God gives him 14,000. He had 500 oxen and 500 donkeys; God gives him 1,000 of each. He had 3,000 camels; God gives him 6,000. He even replaces his sons and daughters. You might say, “But no new child can replace a lost child in a parent’s heart! Nothing could remove that grief!” And you are right.

Notice that Job had seven sons and three daughters before disaster struck—but God did not give him fourteen sons and six daughters afterward. God did not double the number of his offspring as He had doubled the size of his herds. Why? Because Job’s first ten children were not lost to him forever. They were in heaven with God, and Job would one day be reunited with them. That was the confidence and assurance Job expressed in 19:25–26, when he said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”

Job had no doubt that he would survive death and corruption, and so would his children. Nothing, not even ten new children, can replace even one child who leaves this world too soon. The memories, the joys, and the sorrows remain for a lifetime in the heart of a bereaved parent. But Job knew his Redeemer, and he knew he would see his children again.

The account closes, “And so he died, old and full of years” (Job 42:17). The only answer we are given to the question of human

Comparison of Job’s Possessions Before and After His Trials

JOB’S POSSESSIONS BEFORE HIS SICKNESS	JOB’S POSSESSIONS AFTER HIS SICKNESS
7,000 sheep 500 oxen 500 donkeys 3,000 camels	14,000 sheep 1,000 oxen 1,000 donkeys 6,000 camels Replaces his sons and daughters

suffering is that our sufferings take place against a backdrop of Satan’s challenge to God’s government. This answer is given to us, the reader—but it was never given to Job while he lived.

At the beginning of the book you find God, Satan, and Job. At the end of the book, Satan has faded out of the picture. From the beginning to the end of the book, the camera has slowly zoomed in until there are only two figures framed in the lens: God and Job. This book is the story of a genuine, dynamic relationship between two friends, a stormy relationship filled with pain and anger as well as delight and joy.

God never lets go of Job, and Job never lets go of God. Their relationship emerges stronger than ever because of the suffering Job endures.

“I will come forth as gold.”

The deepest note in the book is struck, I believe, when Job says—in the midst of all his pain and desolation—“He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). That is the lesson of this book. Suffering may seem purposeless, yet there is a lesson for us in Job’s life and

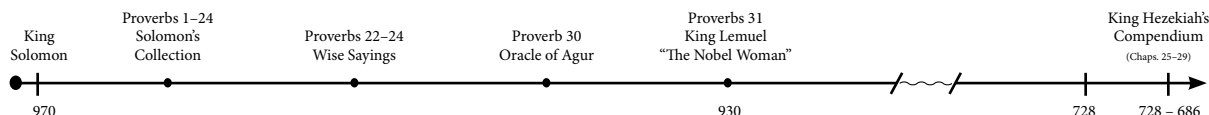
in the lives of all who suffer persecution, loss, poverty, humiliation, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, and on and on. Testing purifies us and reveals the gold of God's character within us.

In the New Testament, Paul rejoices, "We

know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). That is also the triumphant song of Job. It's a song of hope to live by.

May it be your song and mine as well.

What Life Is All About



Some years ago, a man came into my study and told me a heartbreaking story. Impatient with college and eager to escape his parents' home and get out on his own, he had left school and moved to San Francisco. There he experimented with drugs and promiscuity, hoping to find fulfillment in life.

For a while, every night was a party. But soon that lifestyle began to drag him down. He began mainlining heroin, a practice that he had once told himself he would never sink to. His experiments with hallucinogenic drugs gave him fantastic visions but left him full of fear and paranoia.

He soon became unemployable due to his drug habit and ended up as a procurer for prostitutes. He lived on the meanest streets of the city. Soon, nothing could dull the fear and shame he felt inside—not drugs, not sex. When he began feeling powerful suicidal impulses, he realized he needed to reach out for a power beyond himself.

God awakened this man to his need, and he took refuge at a downtown mission. He was detoxed and placed in a Christian program that enabled him to overcome his addictions. In the process, he turned

his life over to Jesus Christ. In our church, he found an accepting, caring community where his faith and Christian character could grow and mature.

The horrors this young man underwent are precisely what God, speaking to us through the book of Proverbs, wants to help us to avoid. The message of Proverbs is that life can never be fully understood nor fully lived except through a relationship with God. The complexities and perils of life are simply too big for us to handle by ourselves. In order to successfully navigate life, with all of its temptations, deceptions, and pitfalls, we need the timeless, dependable wisdom of God.

The Structure of Proverbs

This is a difficult book to outline. At first glance, the subject matter seems to change with every verse. But when you gain an overview of Proverbs, you begin to see that it is logically and helpfully constructed. Once

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to inspire the reader with a love for the wisdom contained in Proverbs, the guidebook to wise choices.

LEFT: Jerusalem

you note the major divisions of this book, you can easily recognize and follow its argument.

A Guidebook to Wise Choices

The book of Proverbs was written and compiled from about 950 to 700 BC. Proverbs begins with a brief preface in the first six verses and continues with a series of ten father-to-son discourses filled with practical exhortations on how to face the problems of life.

Beginning in chapter 10, we have a collection of proverbs from the wise king of Israel, Solomon. How did Solomon acquire his wisdom? Soon after becoming king, Solomon went to the hilltop altar at Gibeon to offer sacrifices to God. During the night, God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5). And Solomon replied, in effect, “Give me a wise and discerning heart to govern Your people.”

God was pleased with Solomon’s request, and said, “Since you have asked for wisdom, and not for long life or wealth or the death of your enemies, I will give you a wise and discerning heart” (see 1 Kings 3:3–15). Because Solomon asked for the treasure of wisdom instead of riches or victory, God gave him all three. So the words of Solomon contained in this section, Proverbs 10 through 24, are the wisdom proverbs of the wisest king in the history of Israel.

The second collection of Solomon’s proverbs begins with chapter 25. These proverbs of Solomon were copied down at the direction of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, after Solomon’s death. The book closes with a postlude in chapters 30 and 31 containing the

words of two unknown individuals, Agur, son of Jakah, in chapter 30, and Lemuel, king of Massa, in chapter 31.

The book of Proverbs speaks to the human will, and is primarily concerned with the choices set before us in life. Someone has wisely said that “choices are the hinges of destiny” because our lives turn on the choices we make. To have a good life that is filled with satisfaction, abundance, and service to God, we must make godly, healthy choices. And the book of Proverbs is a road map to wise decision making.

Proverbs opens by telling us the title and author of the book: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” The theme of wise decision making is set forth clearly in the introductory paragraph:

*For attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight; for
acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair; for
giving prudence to the simple, knowledge
and discretion to the young—let the wise
listen and add to their learning, and let the
discerning get guidance—for understanding
proverbs and parables, the sayings and
riddles of the wise (1:2–6).*

In other words, this collection of wisdom is designed to meet the needs of people of all ages and stages of life, from childhood to youth to maturity. This is the guidebook for understanding what life is all about. It is practical, user-friendly, and is the key to unlocking the most baffling mysteries of life. Reading a proverb takes seconds; memorizing a proverb takes minutes; applying a proverb takes a lifetime.

The next verse gives us the password that unlocks Proverbs and the secrets of life, and summarizes the focus of the entire book:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (1:7).

The Beginning of Wisdom

The book of Proverbs approaches life from the position that God has all the answers. He is all-wise and all-knowing. Nothing is hidden from Him. He understands all mysteries and sees the answer to all riddles. Therefore, the beginning of wisdom is to revere and fear God.

What does the “fear of the Lord” mean? That phrase, which is used often in Scripture, doesn’t refer to a cowardly, cringing sort of fear. God does not want us to live in terror of Him; He wants us to love Him, and as we read in 1 John 4:18, “Perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

The “fear of the Lord” is not the fear that God might hurt us but rather the fear that we might hurt Him! In other words, it is the fear that something we do might offend Him or grieve His loving heart. In this sense, “fear” really means reverence or respect, and it is this kind of loving, respectful fear that is the beginning of true knowledge and wisdom.

Notice: The fear of the Lord is not the end of wisdom. It is not all that is required for being wise; it is only the beginning. Once you have learned to fear and respect God, you still have to learn and experience so much to become mature, godly, and wise.

From Father to Son

Proverbs 1:8 marks the beginning of the ten discourses from a wise, loving father to his growing son. The proverbs begin with the child in the home, dealing with his first relationships, then move to the time when the child’s experiences broaden to include a wider spectrum of friends and influences. The wise father offers insight regarding the powerful influence that friends can have at this age. Clearly, the problem of peer pressure was as big an issue then as it is today. It’s vitally important for young people to know how to choose their friends wisely.

In chapter 3, the father’s counsel is directed toward a young man as he grows up and leaves home. When young people make their way into the city, entering college or the workforce for the first time, they are confronted with new pressures and temptations. Suddenly, they have the freedom to make choices where, as live-at-home teenagers, they were limited.

The father speaks delicately, yet frankly, about the pressures and perils of sex and how wrong choices can wreak destruction in a young person’s life. He also warns against unwise financial entanglements. The theme of this practical passage is summed up in two verses that all Christians, young and old, should commit to memory:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own
understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight
(3:5–6).*

This is a proven formula for the young man or woman who wants to find the secret of life, who wants to be an authentic success. I have never met a young person who didn't want to be successful (however he or she might define success). In my experience, no one has ever said, "My ambition is to be a skid-row bum." The path to true success lies in trusting the Lord with all your heart, whether you seek success in business, success in raising your family, success in the performing arts, success on the mission field or in some other form of ministry. When you trust in Him and acknowledge Him, He will make your paths straight.

Chapters 8 and 9 personify the two ways of life. Wisdom is seen as a beautiful woman, calling those who follow her to come away to the place of victory, achievement, and success in life. Folly, which is arrogant confidence in one's own foolish "wisdom," is personified as an evil woman—attractive, alluring, and tempting the unwary to wander into a trap of destruction and death.

The First Collection of Solomon's Proverbs

In chapter 10 we find the first collection of Solomon's wisdom expressed in pithy nuggets of practical advice covering every situation of life. This is a section that should be read again and again until its wisdom permeates our lives and we have committed passages of it to memory, so that it will be available in times of pressure and decision-making.

This section of Proverbs is made up mostly of contrasts in which the writer sets two opposing paths, or worldviews, side by side to demonstrate the good and evil results of each. As you read this section note the antitheses, as

in Proverbs 10:17: "He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray."

This section also contains comparisons and similes that are powerfully descriptive and insightful. For example, Proverbs 11:22: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion."

What a vivid picture! Can't you just imagine a valuable gold ring with the light glinting off its polished surface like brilliant stars—affixed to the swill-dripping, mud-caked snout of an ugly old porker. Gold signifies value, but here is value misplaced. In the same way, a beautiful woman who misuses her womanhood and her beauty has not learned to place real value on the inward beauty of the spirit. She tragically underestimates her own worth and sells herself as an adornment for ugliness.

Other notable passages include Proverbs 12:16–22, a powerful discourse on the tongue—on how to use our speech for blessing God and others instead of for cursing, defaming, gossiping, lying, lashing out, wounding, and offending God and others.

Proverbs 13:24 is that well-known verse for parents, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Remember, however, that the rod is for guidance and discipline—not for beating or destroying a child's spirit. Parents should always recall the words of Psalm 23:4: "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Whenever pain, in whatever form, must be inflicted on a child—whether corporal punishment, loss of privileges, time-out in a corner, or whatever—the child should always know that you have administered the rod of

correction in love, even in sorrow, not out of anger or revenge. The child should sense that when you say, “This hurts me more than it does you,” you really mean it.

Proverbs 14:12 calls us to recognize the limitations of our own understanding. How often I have seen the truth of these words validated in the lives of well-intentioned people: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” That’s why it’s so important to “trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

Many people spend hundreds of dollars every year on motivational books, tapes, and seminars in order to become successful. But the key to genuine success is found right in the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 16:20 and 22: “Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD. . . . Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools.”

In Proverbs 16:32, we find sound instruction for managing our emotions, such as impatience and anger: “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” That verse is often quoted but seldom believed and put into practice. What a change it would make in our lives if we really understood that the person who is patient and self-controlled is a greater hero than Rambo, Hannibal, Lord Nelson, and Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf combined!

How do we build those qualities of patience and self-control into our lives? By asking God for maturity and by inviting the Holy Spirit to take control over our emotional lives. It

also helps if we ask trusted Christian friends to observe our lives and hold us accountable in these areas. Change and maturity rarely take place overnight. They happen as God gradually gains more and more control over each aspect of our lives. As Galatians 5:22–23 tells us, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control are among the fruit of the Spirit—evidences that God has taken up residence in us, and He is cleaning house.

Proverbs 17:28 tells us that “even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,” or as someone has said, “It is better to remain silent and let everybody think you are a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Solomon’s psychological insight is truly amazing in its depth and applicability to everyday life. For example, Proverbs 19:3 tells us, “A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.” I’ve seen the truth of this proverb proven again and again. We err, we blunder, we sin—then, when we reap the ruinous consequences of our own choices, we blame God! We ask, “Why didn’t God stop me? Why did God allow me to be tempted? Why didn’t God protect me from the consequences of my sin?” We make our own choices, yet we blame God for the harm we bring upon ourselves.

In Proverbs 20:27, we find another insightful statement regarding the nature of human life and the spirit: “The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.” A more accurate rendering of that verse would be, “The spirit of man is the LORD’s lamp; it searches out his inmost being.” The Holy Spirit is the light. We are the lamp. When the lamp of the human spirit holds the light of the Holy Spirit, He

searches the innermost part of our life and we truly begin to understand ourselves for the first time.

In Proverbs 22:6, we find yet another classic (but often misunderstood) bit of counsel for parents: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” I believe this should actually be translated, “Train up a child according to his way . . .” which means, discover your child’s unique character and abilities and bring him or her up in such a way that those beautiful God-given traits can be buffed and polished into precious, Christlike character. When those unique qualities are developed and brought out, then the child will grow to maturity and not depart from them.

As we said above, the proverbs beginning in chapter 10 are in the form of contrasting parallels—two opposing paths compared side by side. These parallels come to a close with Proverbs 22:16. Beginning with verse 17, Solomon switches to a different form of proverb. These are general discourses, two or three verses long, on various subjects such as child-rearing, relationships, getting along with neighbors, and even pre-Christian counsel to forgive instead of taking revenge: “Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did’ ” (24:29). Here in Proverbs, we find an early formulation for one of the most oft-quoted moral sayings in human history—the Golden Rule.

The Second Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs

Chapter 25 begins the second collection of proverbs of Solomon—the proverbs copied

and collected by the royal scribes of King Hezekiah. Verse 2 is a wonderful example: “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.” If you want to have a royal experience, I suggest you search out the glorious truths God has concealed in His Word. That is the glory of kings: to experience the thrilling adventure of discovering the riches hidden in the Bible.

Some of the advice in this section seems mundane but is ever so practical! For example, Proverbs 25:17: “Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house—too much of you, and he will hate you.” Such advice is as fresh as any advice from the pen of Dear Abby.

Some of us let the gossip and hurtful behavior of others destroy our happiness, but Proverbs 26:2 says, “Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest.” If someone says something nasty about you and it is not true, don’t worry about it. Nobody who matters will believe it—and those who do believe it don’t matter. That is just one of many helpful proverbs in chapter 26 on how to deal with troublesome people.

Verses 3 through 12 tell us how to respond to fools. Verses 13 through 16 tell what to do about lazy people. Verses 17 through 23 concern meddlers and how to deal with them. Hateful, vengeful people are addressed in verse 24. And in verses 25–28, we learn to watch out for smooth-tongued deceivers.

In Proverbs 28:27, we learn that no one is an island, that we are all connected across lines of class, race, and income. We should not shut ourselves off from the suffering and needs that surrounds us. Solomon observed: “He who gives to the poor will lack nothing,

but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.”

I’m not saying that you should give money to every panhandler on the street, since you might just be subsidizing drug abuse and idleness. But there are truly needy people—adults and helpless little children—and we must not close our eyes to them.

Agur and Lemuel, the Unknown Authors

Chapters 30 and 31 are authored by two men about whom we know nothing. Chapter 30 gives us the proverbs of Agur. He writes in a distinctly different style from the rest of Proverbs, grouping his sayings in a numerical way. His proverbs tend to begin with a structure like this: “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’ ” (30:15) and “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand” (30:18). One of Agur’s proverbs that resonates with the cry of my own soul is this:

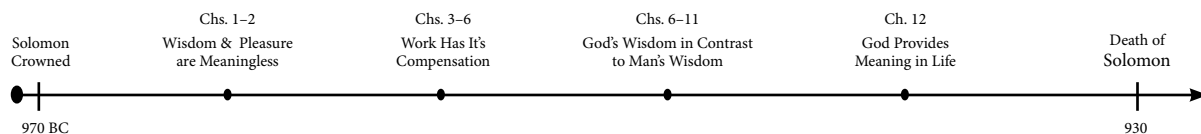
*“Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and dis-
own you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God
(30:7–9).*

Though no one knows exactly who Agur was, his counsel is profound and practical, often making comparisons between spiritual issues and the created world.

Chapter 31 contains the words of King Lemuel concerning what his mother taught him about how to be a king. The epilogue, verses 10 to 31, closes the book of Proverbs on a beautiful note with a description of a virtuous, godly wife. Many feel this is King Lemuel’s description of his own mother—and what a woman she was! If you are a young woman looking for a godly example, I recommend this passage to you. If you are a young man looking for a model wife, I suggest you read it often as a reminder throughout your dating life.

The woman in Proverbs 31 is a picture of strength, intelligence, competence, business acumen, industriousness, glory, and beauty. She is an example of what God intended when He created Eve—a woman who was fashioned out of Adam’s rib to show (as someone has pointed out) that she is to be at his side—not on his back or under his feet! The woman of Proverbs 31 is a partner and companion to her husband, not his inferior or his slave.

This, then, is the book of Proverbs—an excellent book to read and reread on a regular basis. You might even want to read it through one month each year. The book of Proverbs is comprised of 31 chapters—a chapter a day in an average month. Try it, and the wisdom of its pages will seep into your soul and transform your life.

The Inspired Book of Error

The book of Ecclesiastes is unique in Scripture in that it is the only book in the Bible that reflects a human, rather than divine, point of view.

Ecclesiastes is filled with error, yet it is wholly inspired. This may seem confusing. After all, isn't divine inspiration a guarantee of truth? Not necessarily. Inspiration merely guarantees accuracy from a particular point of view: If it is God's point of view, it is true; if it is a human point of view, it may or may not be true. If it is the devil's point of view, it may or may not be true, for whenever Satan speaks, most of his statements are in error and even the truth he uses is intended to mislead.

Inspiration guarantees an accurate reflection of these various points of view. When the Bible speaks, it speaks the truth about God's truth, and it speaks the truth about the errors of human beings and of Satan.

Because Ecclesiastes reflects a human, rather than a divine, point of view, it is often misused and twisted out of context by the enemies of God's Word. Ecclesiastes is the favorite book of atheists and agnostics. Many cults love to quote

this book's erroneous viewpoints and give the impression that these words represent God's viewpoint on life.

In order to come to such a conclusion, however, one has to ignore what Ecclesiastes clearly states at the outset and repeats throughout the book: It draws its conclusion from appearances, from looking at the world from a human perspective. Every aspect of life this book examines is seen as "under the sun." That is where we human beings live.

God sees all of existence and all truth from what we might call a "beyond the sun" and "beyond the stars" perspective. But human beings view reality from a limited, horizon-level perspective, exclusive of divine revelation. We must live out our lives "under the sun," and that is the viewpoint expressed throughout most of Ecclesiastes.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to place Ecclesiastes in its proper perspective. People often quote from this book without realizing that it represents life from a human, not divine, point of view. Though Ecclesiastes is inspired by God, it is designed to show the futility of life from a purely human viewpoint.

The Author of Ecclesiastes

The book opens with this introduction (in the NIV Bible): “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Most other translations begin: “The words of the Preacher. . .” In context, I don’t think Teacher or Preacher are the best words to use in translation of the original Hebrew.

While the original Hebrew word can be translated in these two ways, given the context of Ecclesiastes, I think it could be more accurately translated as Debater, someone who argues a certain point of view. As you read Ecclesiastes you will see that it is composed of a series of arguments set forth from a human perspective. The Debater is Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem—the wisest man who ever lived, according to biblical record.

Solomon was in an unusual position to undertake the investigations set forth in this

book, because during the forty years of his reign there was peace in Israel. And since Solomon did not have to bother himself with military life, he had all the time he needed to pursue his inquiries into the meaning of life.

He also had all the wealth he needed, plus a keen, logical mind. With great resources of money, time, and intellect, he was free to discover what life is all about. Therefore, the value of Ecclesiastes is that it sets forth life from the standpoint of the natural person, apart from divine revelation.

“Vanity of Vanities”

As you read through the book you’ll notice that everything proceeds from Ecclesiastes 1:2: “ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ ”

Older translations of this passage, unfortunately, tend to be confusing to modern readers, using the term “Vanity of vanities!” instead of “Meaningless! Meaningless!” Hundreds of years ago, the average person understood vanity to denote “meaningless.” Today, however, we think of vanity as a state of being conceited and self-obsessed. Someone who spends a lot of time primping before a mirror is considered vain—that is, indulging in vanity.

This kind of vanity is illustrated by the story of the woman who once whispered to her pastor, “I must confess to you, Reverend Jones, that I struggle with the sin of vanity. Every day, I admire myself in the mirror for an hour.”

“My dear lady,” the minister replied, “that is not the sin of vanity you are suffering with. It is merely an excess of imagination.”



Painting of Solomon

The original Hebrew word translated “vanity” in older English translations is properly translated in the NIV to denote emptiness, futility, and meaninglessness. The Debater has completed his survey of life, and gives this conclusion at the beginning of the book: Everything is futile, senseless, and meaningless.

He supports this conclusion with a series of arguments he has gleaned after sifting through the philosophies of life. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this book is that all the philosophies by which people have attempted to live are gathered together here. There is nothing new under the sun, the book says, and how true that is! Here we are, thirty centuries removed from the time this book was written, yet no philosopher has ever produced any ideas or belief systems beyond what the Debater presents in Ecclesiastes.

First we see what could be called the mechanistic view, a favorite among scientists of the past two centuries. This outlook interprets the universe as nothing but a great, grinding machine. The Debater, in his investigation of the processes of the universe, finds nothing but monotonous repetition. This is a remarkable passage, foreshadowing many of the discoveries of modern science. Ecclesiastes 1:6 states: “The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.”

Scientists didn’t discover the circuit of the wind until centuries after this was written—nor did they understand the evaporation cycle of circulating waters when these words were set down in Ecclesiastes 1:7: “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.”

The Debater observes that the rivers run down to the sea, evaporate, come back up to the mountains again as rainfall, and run down to the sea again. The writer has discovered this in his observation of nature, and he says all this is meaningless repetition. He feels the utter weariness of this endless cycle.

So what is his outlook? The universe goes on and we are lost in the revolving, mindless gears of its machinery. This philosophy is prevalent today. It is the conclusion of reductionism—the belief that life can be reduced to mere mechanistic processes. The universe is a machine. We are machines. There is no soul, no spirit, no God. Humankind is a lonely little fleck in the midst of the great, vast, uncaring universe, a tiny speck without meaning.

“Just do it!”

In chapter 2 the writer examines the philosophy of hedonism: the pursuit of pleasure as the chief end of life. Live it up while you can, because it will all be over someday. Life is short—play hard. To these modern-day philosophers and advertising copywriters, the Debater of Ecclesiastes replies: “I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless” (2:1).

Novelist Ernest Hemingway lived the kind of life the Debater describes. He achieved fame and financial success in his early twenties, lived among the literary elites in Paris, hunted big game in Africa, watched bullfights in Madrid, fished for blue marlin in Cuba, and enjoyed an endless stream of whiskey and women. Yet Hemingway continually questioned the meaning of his own life. On July 2, 1961, he

took a shotgun down from the wall of his house in Idaho and ended his earthly existence.

Money could mask his pain. Sex could help him forget his pain. Alcohol could anesthetize his pain. But the pain was always there, underneath the momentary pleasures.

The Debater of Ecclesiastes goes on to itemize the pleasures of this life: the pleasures of laughter and the pleasures of gracious society. For a while, these experiences enabled him to forget the meaningless of his life, but in time, even laughter produced a weariness of spirit. The Debater tried to find meaning through acquiring possessions, as so many materialists do today. In Ecclesiastes 2:9–10, he wrote, “I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.”

Yet, after giving himself to the accumulation of wealth and possessions, he comes to the conclusion that this, too, has brought only emptiness of spirit. “Live for today” seems like a great motto—until tomorrow comes. Materialism does not satisfy our deep longings.

So where did the Debater turn next? To the realm of ideas: the extremes and opposites of belief systems and ideologies:

*Then I turned my thoughts to consider
wisdom,
and also madness and folly.
What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?
I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.
The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize*

*that the same fate overtakes them both
(2:12–14).*

Wisdom is better than foolishness, he concludes, but ultimately both the wise and the foolish end up in the same place—the grave. If death overtakes both the wise and the foolish, what does wisdom gain you? In terms of the human perspective, a life lived “under the sun,” wisdom is meaningless. It makes no final difference.

In verse 17, the Debater reaches a shattering conclusion: “I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” Pleasure. People. Possessions. The pursuit of wisdom. It’s all meaningless. In the end, the Debater hates his life, hates his toil, and surrenders to despair.

Existential Despair

In chapter 3, the Debater describes life from what we now call the existentialist viewpoint. Existentialism, as an organized school of thought, dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and is embodied in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Yet existentialism is truly humanity’s oldest philosophy, and derives from an older philosophy called fatalism. Its adherents believe that life is fatal. No one gets out of this life alive, so live for the moment.

French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.” Friedrich Nietzsche expressed the existentialist view this way: “Regarding life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: it is worthless.” Pondering the existence



Martin Heidegger



Friedrich Nietzsche



Jean-Paul Sartre

of God, Nietzsche wrote, “Is man one of God’s blunders? Or is God one of man’s blunders?”

The influence of existentialism rose sharply at the end of World War II, when Europe was emerging from the smoking rubble of war. Everything that people had previously pinned their hopes on—the institutions of government and religion—had proven powerless to prevent the cataclysm of all-out war. Their hope shattered, people asked themselves, “What can we trust?” And they concluded that they could trust only their feelings and experiences from moment to moment.

That is where we find the Debater at this point in Ecclesiastes. He says, in effect, “I’ve tried to live as a fatalist, to live in the now, to experience my present existence, knowing there is no future, no meaning, no sense to it all. But I was empty.” He writes:

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under
heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to
gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw
away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace
(3:1–8).*

The present passes. The next moment comes and change comes with it. We cannot remain in “the now.” All these events described by the Debater of Ecclesiastes eventually come upon us. And what do we have left? Do we have anything more significant, more enduring than this fleeting moment? If not, then existentialism leads us to despair.

We cannot live only in this moment; God did not create us to do so. Verse 11—one of Scripture’s most profound passages—tells us that we were made for nothing less than *eternity*. Solomon writes: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

We can never rest with momentary explanations of our existence and the world

around us. We are made to look deeper into time, deeper into the workings of the world, deeper into our own souls, deeper into the mind of God. Eternity is in our hearts. God placed it there. The Debater saw all this. He knew that the events of life and death are inescapable. When life is over, all people—men and women, rich and poor, wise and foolish—face the same fate: All turn to dust.

Under the sun, from the human point of view, the future promises only futility and despair—so what's the use of living?

Everything Is Meaningless

In chapter 4, Solomon laments all the toil and oppression that he has seen in the business world: the envy and cutthroat competition, the exploitation of workers, the meaninglessness of trying to climb the ladder of success. His observations are as timely today as when they were written.

In chapter 5, he examines religion, and yes, even religion, he finds, is meaningless! Trying to live a good life and be a good person is meaningless! There's no practical value to it, no ultimate satisfaction. What's more, it's hard to tell religious and irreligious people apart! He observes that many religious people behave in unethical ways. They break vows to God. They oppress the poor. They are greedy and selfish. Religious formalism is empty and meaningless like everything else.

Chapter 6 reiterates Solomon's theme of the meaninglessness of riches and possessions. We spend all our efforts trying to feed ourselves, yet our hunger is never satisfied. The rich have everything they want and need, yet they still have cravings that can't be satisfied. What can you get for the person who has everything?

One who is unsatisfied, even with the wealth of a king, is no happier than a pauper. It all comes out to the same thing in the end.

In chapter 7, Solomon views life from the standpoint of stoicism—a cultivated indifference to events. Happiness, sadness, pleasure, pain, good fortune, tragedy; it's all the same. Accept the one without rejoicing and the other without complaining. Accept whatever happens to you with stoic indifference. As Solomon observes in Ecclesiastes 7:15, "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness."

Righteousness doesn't always pay, wickedness sometimes does, at least as judged by the evidence that we can observe "under the sun," at the human level of understanding. So, from a human perspective, not God's, the Debater concludes, "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?" (7:16–17).

In other words, aim for a happy medium. Stop beating your brains out trying to be good. Sure, it's okay to be good, but don't be too good. Live a little, sin a little, and don't worry about it. Don't be a fanatic. Avoid extremes. That's the "wisdom" of the world talking, not God's wisdom.

Chapters 8 through 10 and the first eight verses of chapter 11 are a connected discourse examining what might be referred to as the wisdom of the world or the commonsense view of life. In chapter 8, anyone approaching life from this point of view is encouraged to master the power structures of the world. He says, in effect, "Try to understand who is an

authority and who isn't, and do your best to be on the right side at the right time." That's a familiar philosophy, isn't it? You can find the same kind of thinking in the business and self-help sections of your local bookstore.

Solomon goes on to tell you what the self-help books won't: Even if you get what you want, even if you align yourself with the power structures of this world, if you get in good with the Big Boys and start winning advances, awards, raises, the corner office, and the key to the executive washroom, it's all meaningless.

In chapter 9, he examines the world's value judgments and points out they all come to the same thing:

*"I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift or the battle to
the strong, nor does food come to the wise or
wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all"
(9:11).*

What difference, then, do worldly values make?

In chapter 10, he explores the inequity, unfairness, and uncertainty of life. Even a wise lifestyle can let you down. Sometimes, no matter how carefully and diligently we live, we end up at the bottom of the food chain. Slaves end up on horseback, while princes wind up walking off shoe leather. Fools climb to the top of the heap, while the wise end up underneath it. Despite your best efforts to live a good life, in the end life is not fair. In fact, life is meaningless.

In Chapter 11 Solomon talks about work ethic—the belief that success is largely just a matter of diligence. To get something out of life, you need to work hard and apply yourself. To be as happy as possible during

the brief, meaningless span of your existence, rejoice when you can, but don't expect the good times to last: "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many" (11:8).

You see? The Debater has proved his case. Everything is meaningless. Everything comes to the same thing: zero, naught, nothing.

But before you get too depressed, remember this: The entire book of Ecclesiastes, up to this point, has been written from a human perspective, not God's. From a human point of view, the Debater has summed up everything very well. Life lived apart from God comes to only one end: meaninglessness and despair.

But there is another viewpoint that hasn't been expressed yet. Stay tuned—for here comes the perspective that sees life from beyond the sun, not merely under it. Here comes the perspective of God.

A New Perspective

With the final chapter, Ecclesiastes 12, comes a shift in viewpoint, a recognition that life is highly significant when God is enthroned in a human life. This is Solomon's own true conclusion to all of his findings, and it begins with these words: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'" (12:1).

Up to this point, we have been looking at life from a worldly, horizontal, under-the-sun perspective, and the conclusion that seems inescapable from the first eleven chapters of Ecclesiastes is that life is short, so live for today. The worldly philosophy Solomon has laid out for us is summarized (ironically, almost

satirically) in Ecclesiastes 10:19: “A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.” It sounds practical. It seems to make sense. But this is not God’s counsel. It’s the world’s counsel. It’s Satan’s counsel—and it’s a snare for the worldly, the arrogant, and the unwary.

God uses eleven chapters in Ecclesiastes to illuminate the folly of worldly thinking. He wants us to realize, whenever we see or hear people who live on the basis of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die,” this is all that the world has to offer, apart from God. This is the logical conclusion of a life that has erased God from the picture.

How tragic, how blindly pessimistic. Such thinking denies the glory of our humanness and reduces us to animals. We are born, we eke out our squalid little pleasures amid the sufferings of this life, we operate on animal instincts of hunger and sex drive and self-preservation, until one day the truck with our name on it comes along, runs us down, and leaves us dead in the road. That is the gloomy worldview of a life lived without God.

Contrast this pessimistic view with what the writer says in the last chapter: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole *duty* of man” (12:13 emphasis added).

But wait—the word “duty” doesn’t belong there. It doesn’t appear in the original Hebrew text but was mistakenly supplied by a translator. Solomon does not say that fearing and obeying God is our *duty*. He’s saying that

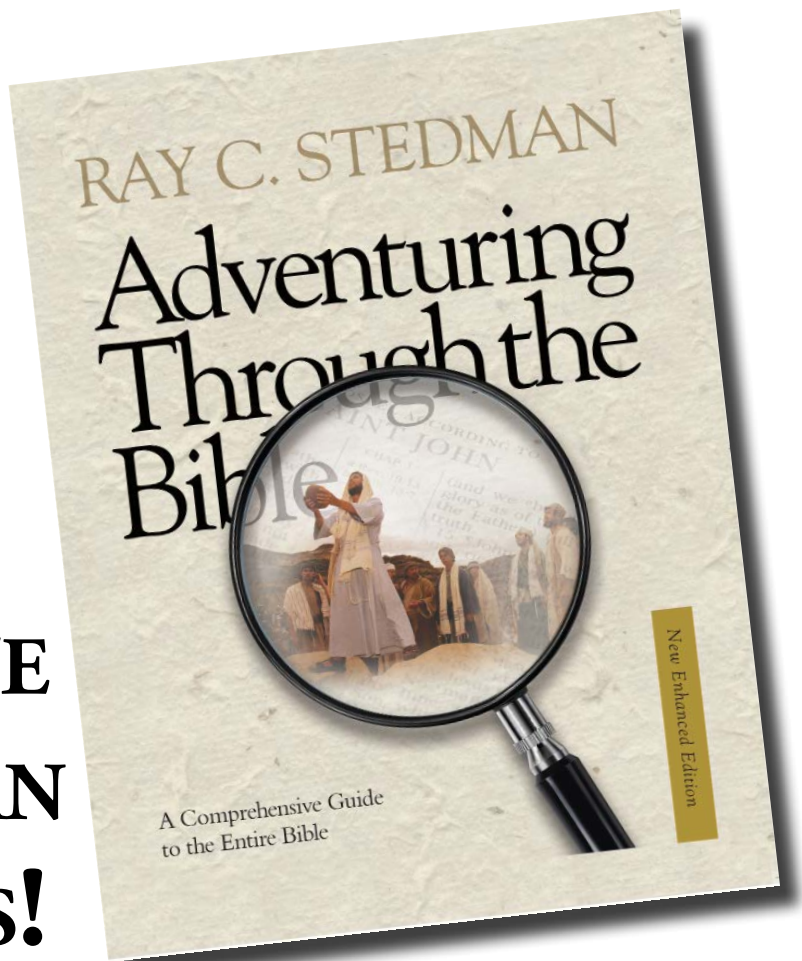
this is “the whole of man.” This is what we were made for. This is our purpose in life.

If we fear God and keep His commandments, then we have finally found meaning. All is no longer “vanity of vanities,” no longer meaningless. Life is vibrant, exciting, exhilarating. This is the meaning we were meant to build our lives upon. In knowing Him, we find wholeness. In serving Him, we are doing what we were created to do. In receiving eternal life, we find true satisfaction.

The secret of living is to enthrone God in our lives. The sooner we learn this truth, the richer our lives will be. That is why chapter 12 emphasizes the importance of obeying God “in the days of your youth.” Thinking back on my own youth, I feel a great sympathy for young people today. They don’t want to waste their lives; they want their lives to *count* for something, to have *meaning*. That’s why the book of Ecclesiastes is such an important book for young people to understand. It knocks all the false props out from under us, then points the way to true significance and satisfaction in life.

I can testify that the Debater’s conclusion is true: Everything is indeed vanity and meaninglessness—*apart from God*. But if you place God at the center of your life, you will discover all that God designed you to be. The person who truly walks with God will never have lived in vain. All of life and even death itself will have meaning. Trust Him, worship Him, follow Him, love Him, and you will rejoice all the days of your life.

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