Notes on Ecclesiastes

William Kelly

Public domain. As published on plymouthbrethren.org.

Also online at https://plymouthbrethren.org/article/3278

KEE Ministry Library · Faithful Men
kee-ministry-library.netlify.app

Ecclesiastes

It is difficult to conceive a stronger contrast than this book affords to Canticles in aim, character, and handling. For the latter, of all the O.T., presents Messiah’s affection for the object of His choice with a fulness and particularity beyond what is found in any or all others of the Holy Writings; and the effect is produced on that object in drawing out a suited return, with experiences of the deepest interest in its course till the consummation. Here on the contrary it is the sorrowful converse of the utter incapacity of all that is under the sun to satisfy the heart-cravings of one who had personal capacity and unlimited means of finding happiness in the creature if it had been possible. It is the negative counterpart of Proverbs, with the sententious wisdom of which it has not a little in common. The difference of the design accounts for “God” in Ecclesiastes, and “the LORD” or Jehovah in Proverbs. For in the one it is simply a question of man as he is, and therefore of God as such; whereas the other looks at the scene of moral government and those set in relation to it. The Song on the other hand is so full of the Bridegroom and the bride, as to have neither; for one can hardly regard Ecclesiastes 8:6, admirably strong though the last word be, as an exception — it at any rate just proves the rule. The reserve of the Bridegroom’s person, elsewhere unveiled, preserves the divine glory intact; but the plain bearing of the Song gives the fullest scope for the reciprocal love that reigns throughout, and this is best expressed without introducing either of the divine names.

But it is not hard to conceive the Holy Spirit employing the same vessel for His power in writing all these books. Nor did the man ever live who could be a more fitting instrument than Solomon if God so pleased. For He gave him “wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the sons of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all the nations round about. And he spoke three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of the trees, from the cedar that is on Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall; he spake also of cattle, and of birds, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kings 4:29-34).

But other elements entered which God could use in His wisdom. The range which Solomon traversed was immense in his unique position, not only of royalty over the throne of Jehovah (1 Chron. 29:23), but as endowed, with wisdom and knowledge beyond every other, and, as he did not ask, with riches and wealth and honour beyond what any king possessed before or since. Alas! this was not all. Magnificence, luxury, commerce, reputation, and even the most intimate relations with the heathen became a snare; and the largest wisdom is not faith or righteousness. The king was forbidden in Deut. 17 to multiply to himself horses and wives; Solomon disobeyed flagrantly in both respects. The king was commanded to write him a copy of Jehovah’s law in

a roll, that he might learn to fear Him and keep all those words; but his wives when he was old turned away his heart after other gods, which was far from being perfect with Jehovah like his father David. If God employed David as the vehicle of the noblest psalms and hymns for his people's praise, spite of his grievous falls, there is nothing on that ground to deny His choice of Solomon, not only in his earlier years when His pleasure in this king is express, but even in such a writing as Ecclesiastes brimful of bitter and humbling experience. On the contrary, bearing in mind the difference between Israel and the church or Christianity, we may readily perceive how Solomon, as in fact he was the writer if we believe scripture, was also the most adapted to the purpose of God.

If the Preacher or Convener had not described himself as son of David, king in Jerusalem, who else could have written it but Solomon? He tells us too that he was "king over Israel in Jerusalem"? Who could this possibly be but Solomon? Even his immediate heir quickly ceased to be king over Israel, losing ten out of the twelve tribes, and became distinctively king over Judah as opposed to Israel. But even if the book had no such marks as Ecclesiastes 1:1, and 12, who does, who could, speak of wisdom as in the latter half of Ecclesiastes 1 but Solomon? Who could sit in judgment of all that is done under the heavens, and pronounce on its nothingness as in Ecclesiastes 2, but one with the weight of that great king? Was any one that ever lived after him in Jerusalem entitled so truly as he to speak of great works that he made, of building and planting with every accessory; of servants within and without; of such possession of herds and flocks and on such a scale of grandeur; of wisdom

remaining, notwithstanding vast accumulations of silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings? There is no real ground to imagine an anonymous writer personating Solomon: an idea quite alien to scripture, though reasonable in the eyes of worldly men used to fiction, Here all is intense and solemn reality, as he had proved too well who could speak beyond any.

The colloquial character just suits one who loved to unbend from a court; and the Aramaic forms, one who had vast peaceful intercourse with the neighbouring peoples in every grade. Never was a mind less tied to time or place.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

“The words of the Preacher (or Convener), son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; the whole [is] vanity. What profit hath man in all his toil wherewith he toileth under the sun?”

“Generation cometh and generation goeth, and the earth for ever abideth. And riseth the sun and setteth the sum, and to its place hasteth (lit. panteth) where it riseth. Going toward the south and turning round toward the north, turning continually goeth the wind, and in its turnings returneth the wind. All the rivers go to the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again. All things [are] fatiguing; one cannot express [them]: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing. What hath been [is] what will be, and what hath been done, what will be done; and there is not all new under the sun. Is there a thing whereof one saith, See, this is new? It belonged to the ages that were before us. [There is] no remembrance of former things, nor shall there be

remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall be after them" (vers. 1-11).

The introduction lays the thesis clearly before us; and this by a man not inspired only but suited personally to impress the homily beyond all that ever lived. Hence the importance of its emanating from king Solomon, and of the reader knowing on the highest authority that the words were his, and none other's. Impossible to convey this more simply and affectingly than by the way the Holy Spirit has chosen to effect it. Such a communication, strange at first sight, solemn increasingly on reflection, tells from God its own tale; which man has been always slow to learn, ready to believe that his life consists in the abundance of the things he possesses. It is not guilt, as in Ps. 32, Ps. 51, which is here discussed, but the unhappiness of man whose heart rises not above the creature. The amplest means, the highest capacity, the most exalted rank the most active mind, the most cultivated taste, yea, and wisdom above all men, only give intensity to the dissatisfaction and the misery; and Solomon was the man both to experience it in his departure from God and to give us the profit of it, when grace gave him to review and communicate it all for everlasting admonition. It is the fruit of the fall and of sin: what else could it be? "Vanity of vanities," and not here and there only but "the whole is vanity" or evanescence, including most of all man without God; not the faith that looks above the sun to the resources of grace and in the fear that keeps His commandments. Our own idiom, "taking pains," answers in its measure to the toil of man "under the sun," profitless for happiness (ver. 3). "The shadow" earnestly desired by the hireling, how unsubstantial! Job. 7. On

the other hand, “he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever; and this is the more apparent when “the world passeth away and the lust thereof.” “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride (or vain glory) of life is not of the Father, but is of the world.” So clear and trenchant a revelation as this, however, awaited another day, when the Son of God was come and has given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true. Real repentance is but pessimism in unbelieving eyes.

The thesis is followed by four illustrations from the natural sphere (vers. 4-7), and by as many from the moral (vers. 8-11).

There is all the difference between the inanimate earth, and what has life upon the earth or in it. But what a gap between a sentient creature and that which but vegetates! still more between what has but a soul of life natural, and the human body into which Jehovah Elohim breathed the breath of life, and man, only man thereby, became a living soul; or, as this very book expresses it, “the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downwards” (Ecclesiastes 3:21). Yet “generation goeth, and generation cometh, and the earth for ever abideth.” What is there here to meet the void of man’s heart?

Let him look up then at the sun, that brightest orb of a man’s vision, which above all to his senses sheds light and heat; without which what would be the earth, and all its denizens, and most of all man? What of profit, or happiness, does he thence derive, as he looks from under it? “And the sun riseth, and setteth the sun, and hasteth to its place where it riseth.” Is this the spring of

happiness that his spirit pines after? Orderly and unfailing movement is apparent in connection with the earth; but does this affect man's sense of evanescence in all his being and environment save to aggravate it?

Well, but the wind, which is the same Hebrew word as that which expresses the highest part of sentient and even intelligent nature, the wind whose movements are in the strongest contrast with mundane motion, is there any relief to be found for his tired spirit there? "Going toward the south and turning round toward the north, turning continually goeth the wind, and in its turnings returneth the wind." Nought is there here to console his anxious spirit.

There remain the rivers or mountain streams: can they refresh a mind diseased? "All the rivers go to the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither rivers go, thither they go again." Admirably for the earth and its atmosphere and every living creature; but not a drop of comfort. for him that was made in God's image after His likeness; now that all creation is ruined and wretched through sin, all subjected to vanity, the whole of it groaning and travailing in pain together till now; and man its chief most of all feeling and lamenting, unless he renounce God and Satan sear him, and he be given up to the fatal dream of perfectibility through education and science and all the other devices of his unbroken will.

But these devices are just what the next four verses cover and expose in their futility to supply the needed value.

"All matters are fatiguing; one cannot express [them]: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing." Here the Preacher turns to all the things

of nearer experience and direct human interest, and declares that all the things or words, fatigue (or as some think, feebleness), are beyond one's expression: not only so, but even for the senses of largest range and the easiest to please, the eye is not satisfied, nor the ear filled. The result is weariness and disappointment, not happiness. What a difference where one beholds the Son and believes on Him! For He is the Bread of life, and the believer feeding on Him hungers not nor ever thirsts more; and no wonder, seeing that the water He gives becomes in him a fountain of water springing up into eternal life. Fallen man becomes increasingly wretched, unless when under deadly opiates which end in the deeper misery of reaction.

Then is there not the enjoyment of novelty? "What hath been is what will be, and what hath been done, what will be done, and there is not all new under the sun." Granting this is the moral province, seen especially in what has been done; but is there not a matter of which it may be said, See, this is new? Even this hath been in, or belonged to, the ages that were before us.

But is there no pleasure thence, from the last infirmity of noble minds, as men say? "No remembrance of former things [is there], nor will be remembrance of those to come with persons that will be afterwards." Such is experience under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 - 2.

After the abstract introduction the Preacher enters on an experience, so personal that one might call it autobiography, and so full that it covers all human life. This is unbroken and evident in the portion that follows.

“I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven: it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all [is] vanity and a striving after wind. [That which is] crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart hath had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also was a striving after wind. For in much wisdom [is] much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (vers. 12-18).

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this - also [was] vanity. I said of laughter, [It is] mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I searched in mine heart how to cheer my flesh with wine, mine heart yet guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what [it was] good for the sons of men that they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all [kinds of] fruit: I made me pools of water, to water therefrom the forest where, trees were reared; I bought men-servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem.

“I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men

singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, concubines very many.1 So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them: I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced because of my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had,wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all [was] vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

“And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly: for what [can do] the man that cometh after the king? That which hath been already done. Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man’s eyes [are] in his head, and the fool walketh in darkness: and yet I perceived that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also [was] vanity. For of the wise man, even as of the fool, [there is] no remembrance for ever; seeing that in the days to come all will have been already forgotten. And how doth the wise man die even as the fool! So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me: for all [is] vanity and a striving after wind.

“And I hated all my labour wherein I laboured under the sun: seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be wise or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed wisdom under the sun. This also [is] vanity. Therefore I

turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour wherein I had laboured under the sun. For there is a man whose labour [is] with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skilfulness; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also [is] vanity and a great evil. For what hath a man of all his labour, and of the striving of the heart, wherein he laboureth under the sun? For all his days [are] sorrows, and his travail is grief; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity.

“[There] is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it [is] from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? For to the man that pleaseth him God giveth wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that pleaseth God. This also [is] vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:1-26).

What gives peculiar point is the personal position of the Preacher. If exemption from the sense of wretchedness, in the survey of man as he is on the earth, could be the portion of any, it might have been conceived to be the lot of king Solomon. It is his appraisal in the Spirit which lies before us, that faith might profit by all he tells. It is not from lack of power, interest, or research, any more than of capability or resources. He gave his heart to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. The sense of its fruitlessness, and sorrow over its evil, were only the deeper In one who could best appreciate all. What he began with as a truth he only sealed as facts he had proved. “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, the whole is

vanity and vexation of spirit.” Somehow death was in the pot. Crookedness was here; failure or defect there.

It was not so before sin entered into the world; on the contrary God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. When sin was there, God made the evil felt; and the consequence is here laid bare by the most conspicuous type of Him who will yet come in power and glory as well as righteousness, and bring the days of heaven upon the earth, seasons indeed of refreshing,, from the Lord’s face; not simply witness to them as now, and of things higher still for the heavens, but of prophecy fully accomplished in times of restitution of all things. The honour is reserved for Him Who is worthy, the conqueror of Satan, the effectuator of God’s will in and for the universe, the reconciler not only of us who believe, but of all things for that day and for ever. Far different is this day, when crookedness and defect abide, too great for man, and not yet the time for God; but the misery meanwhile is felt fully and expressed in detail. Solomon’s vast experience of wisdom and knowledge only probed the sore, whether on the side of wisdom to cultivate, or of madness and folly to eschew. This too he felt to be but pursuit of wind, “for in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18).

Hence mirth is tried next, and natural alleviation for those bitter of soul, as we hear in Prov. 31. It was all in vain, and the feeling of disappointment recurs (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3). Might not activity in great works succeed better? This Solomon essayed and carried out with extraordinary diligence and splendour; but reviewing all this work he wrought and the toil he toiled,

he could rest in none of it: the whole was vanity and vexation of spirit, and no profit under the sun (vers. 4-11). His reflections follow on wisdom and madness and folly; for he knew what it must be for the man that enters after the king: at best a repetition of the same vain pursuit of satisfaction here below. Still it is allowed that there is a profit to wisdom above folly, as in that of light above darkness: the wise has his eyes in his head, while the fool walks in darkness; yet if to all is the same result, what an irony of event! So he had found it himself; and soon all would be alike forgotten here below, the one dying as the other: so that he had a disgust of life and hated all his toil; especially as it must be left to a successor, and who knows whether he will be wise or infatuated? Yet must he have power in all that toil and fruit of wisdom under the sun. This too was vanity. A feeling of despair ensued over all his toil, as he thought of an untoiling heir. For what was there but pain and vexation in his employment, even in the night his heart forbidding rest. Was not this too vanity? (vers. 11-23.)

The conclusion come to in vers. 24-26 is to receive thankfully what comes from the hand of God, Who gives man good in His sight, wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner travail to gather and heap up, that it may be given to the good in God’s sight. And what is this but vanity and vexation of spirit?

Ecclesiastes 3, 4.

The next division of the book embraces chaps 3, 4. Whatever be the misery of man as such, and no creature under the heavens is so exposed or so sensitive to sorrow, with the awful dawning on his guilty conscience

of what may and must be after death, he cannot but also perceive that he is under a system that orders providentially all that affects most nearly the changing life that now is. This is drawn out in what follows, comprehensively and clearly.

“To all is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens: a time to he born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace” (vers. 1-8).

Man’s anxious toil can alter none of the facts. God’s hand arranges man’s place is to bow. Cain rebelled and gained nothing but bitter loss; and many another has taken the way of Cain with the same issue invariably, no doubt. Man likes to rule, and none the less since he is fallen, sinful, and wilful; but as creatures, none can rule aright, who does not serve One Who is over him, over all persons and all things. To fear Him is the beginning of wisdom; to forget and above all to deny Him is folly, ruinous now and evermore.

Hence the question asked in ver. 9, and negatived in what follows.

“What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? I have seen the travail which God hath given

to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live; and also, that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God hath done it, that men should fear before Him. That which is hath been already; and that which is to be hath already been; and God seeketh again that which is passed away" (vers. 9-15).

It is wholesome for man to feel how little he can find out from the beginning to the end the working that God works. Of Himself we can only receive what God reveals; but this is not the question here discussed. The Preacher accordingly speaks his conviction that there is nothing better for them — nothing good in them — but to rejoice and to do good; as He had shown in His work (whatever man or Satan had done to the contrary) only what is excellent and appropriate. Man should in Him confide, endowed as he is, yet in a scene altogether beyond him; and then what must the Maker be? As man, he is to receive what his nature needs, provided ungrudgingly for him to see or enjoy good in all his labour. What could man's toil have availed, unless it were God's gift? Then he enlarges beautifully on "whatsoever God doeth." How indeed could it be otherwise? As our Saviour said, "There is one good, even God", nor would He be called good by one who did not confess Him to be God: if not God, not good in the real absolute sense of the word; yet

became He man in the fullest dependence on God, as He calls us to be.

From ver. 16 the Preacher shows that God's judgment is the key to all the present confusion. So it is for man, till the Son of God came and brought in grace and truth which gives the light of God fully.

"And moreover I saw under the sun, that in the place of judgment wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness wickedness was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time for every purpose and every work. I said in mine heart, It is because of the sons of men that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are but as beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no pre-eminence above the beasts: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth? Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him?" (vers. 15-22).

How vivid the picture revelation even then drew, when only the first man stands before us, not as now the Second man in Christ risen and glorified! The world was not so old in wickedness when the wise king reigned and preached; nor was it of heathen only he spoke, but of the favoured people too. Alas! Christendom has only brought in more subtilty in impiety and unrighteousness

for all professors who are not born anew. Outwardly, and this is what he speaks of here, the same end of death awaits men and beasts. It is avowedly but what is under the sun. The veil is not removed. Yet he takes care to raise the question: who knoweth the spirit of the sons of men that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? If man knows not with certainty, and hence is prone to vain discussion, God not only knows but has revealed fully by and in our Lord Jesus, Who brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel. If man is bad, and he surely is, God is good beyond all creature measure; and as this was always true, so it is now proved perfectly in Christ.

Ecclesiastes 4.

Here the Preacher turns, from unjust judgments, where there was most guilt, to the sufferers under them often without succour or sympathy: a state apt to provoke reprisals and revolution, only increasing yet more the disorder of sin.

“Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive; yea, better than them both did I esteem him which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

“Then I saw all labour and every skilful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is an handful

with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and striving after wind (vers. 1-6).

Till Christ return, there is no adequate correction or redress. The Preacher, who only speaks here of things present, could but praise the dead who had passed away, or the unborn who saw nothing. Such is man, that success only excites envy in the neighbour, and bitter self- mortification in the fool. The quiet thankful soul here, as before, alone is wise.

Then the vanity of selfishness is portrayed from ver. 7, and the value of fellowship from ver. 9, from which the king is not exempt, especially as he may be foolish and the people fickle (vers. 13-16). Vanity and vexation reign everywhere.

“Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun. There is one [that is alone], and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labour, neither is his eye satisfied with riches. For whom then, do I labour, and deprive my soul of good? This also is vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he faileth, and hath not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth: but how can one be warm alone? And if a man prevail against him that is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

“Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who knoweth not how to receive admonition any more. For out of prison he came forth to be the king; yea, even in his kingdom he was born poor. I saw all the

living which walk under the sun, that they were with the child, the second, that stood up in his stead. [There was] no end of all the people, of all them over whom he was: yet they that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind" (vers. 7-16).

Never will the state of man and the world be a joy to the glory of God, till He come again and come in power to reign, Who first came to glorify God in obedience and suffering for sin, and thus to lay the foundation for blessing in righteousness evermore.

Ecclesiastes 5, 6.

A natural division begins with chap. 5, which may be said to stretch over the following chapters also. It has the form of exhortation at the start, but soon passes into the prevalent character of the book. The first of rights is that God should have His; all is wrong when God is left out; and this is quite the root of the misery in man and the world. Yet neither the house of God, nor utterance before Him, nor vows to Him, can rescue from folly or vanity. Hearing from God takes precedence of speaking to Him. The weakness of man, fallen as he is, pursues him everywhere. The sole resource for the wise man is to fear God. Without this the religious effort but increases the danger. And the conviction of One higher than the high preserves from wonder. As yet all is out of course. So far is rank or wealth from Him all. A king depends on the field; and no resources satisfy the possessor, but fall to others; so that the labourer's lot is often preferable, and riches a hurt instead of a comfort, and no permanency either, and thus he goes as he came naked. Where the profit of such labour? When things are received from God as His gift, how sad to see riches,

possessions, honour, with incapacity to enjoy! Long life, and numerous offspring, in such a case do not extract the sting: he is worse off than an abortion. Insatiable desire ruins all. Contention is vain with Him that is mightier than he. God, not man, knows what is good for him, and God reveals an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and unfading reserved in heaven; but till Christ died and rose, it was comparatively hidden. Misery here was plain, especially to the wise.

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they know not they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh with a multitude of business: and a fool’s voice with a multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou vowest. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words [are] also vanities: but fear thou God.

“If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for one higher than the high regardeth; and there are higher than they. Moreover the profit of the earth is every way: the king is served by the field.

“He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this also is vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, save the beholding of them with his eyes? The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the fulness of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

“There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun, riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt; and those riches perish by evil adventure; and if he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand. As be came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that laboureth for the wind? All his days also he eateth in darkness, and he is sore vexed and hath sickness and irritation.

“Behold, that which I have seen to be good and to be comely is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labour, wherein he laboureth under the sun, all the days of his life which God hath given him: for this is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him with the joy of his heart” (vers. 1-20).

Ecclesiastes 6.

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honour, so that he lacketh nothing for his

soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, but his soul be not filled with good, and moreover he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. For it cometh in vanity, and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness; moreover it hath not seen nor known the sun; this hath rest rather than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, Yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place? All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what advantage hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor man, that knoweth to walk before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

“Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago, and it is known that it is man: neither can he contend with him that is mightier than he. Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun”? (vers. 1- 12).

What a contrast is this life of “days” and “vanity” and “shadow” with life eternal, now given in Christ to the believer and the bright hope of being with Him Who is its source and fulness where He is, and we shall have its perfect unhindered expansion and display in its proper heavenly sphere! But all was veiled then. Now life and incorruption Christ has brought to light through the gospel.

Ecclesiastes 7.

Here the Preacher turns from the argumentative strain of what precedes to hortative maxims of a practical kind, however paradoxical in form. They are wise words in the midst of vanity and sorrow, to guard the man when the evil cannot yet, be judged in power or redressed.

“A [good] name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth. [It is] better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that [is] the end of all men; and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools in the house of mirth. [It is] better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise, than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so [is] the laughter of the fool. This also [is] vanity. Surely oppression maketh a wise man foolish; and a gift destroyeth the understanding. Better [is] the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit [is] better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools. Say not thou, How is it that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this. Wisdom [is] good with an inheritance: yea, more excellent [is it] for them that see the sun. For wisdom is a defence, [even as] money [is] a defence: but the excellency of knowledge [is, that] wisdom preserveth the life of him that hath it. Consider the work of God: for who can make straight [that] which he hath made crooked? In the day of prosperity enjoy good, and in the day of adversity consider: God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should

not find out any thing that shall be after him" (vers. 1-14).

Prov. 22 opens with a kindred sentiment: "A name is rather to be chosen than great riches, favour is better than silver and gold." Men do not think so, still less so act; but thus it is; and the loss is irreparable. The day of death closes the sorrow of the world, into which birth ushers fallen man. No doubt, Christ changes all; but this is not the truth discussed here, but the present scene. Hence the profit of going to the house of mourning over that of feasting, and of rebuke from the wise over the song of fools: which is mere noise and blaze for a moment. Again, the affliction of life, or oppression, is apt to daze a wise man, as a gift to destroy the heart's purpose; so that the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and longsuffering than highmindedness. And as it is well to guard against hasty anger, so especially against retaining it. Nor do they enquire wisely who assume that the former days were better than these. Wisdom with an inheritance is good and profitable here below. It is a shadow or shelter, as is money, yet how differently! For the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to him that has it. Hence the folly of fighting against the goads, of lack of sympathy with what God orders of joy or sorrow. Our true wisdom is in dependence on Him.

"All [this] have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a righteous one that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked one that prolongeth [his life] in his evil-doing. Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself overwise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? [It is] good that thou

shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from that withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all. Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city. Surely [there is] not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not. Also take not heed unto all words that are spoken, lest thou hear thy servant curse thee; for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.

“All this have I proved in wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it [was] far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who will find it out? I turned about, I and my heart, to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the reason [of things], and to know [that] wickedness [is] folly, and [that] foolishness [is] madness: and I find a thing more bitter than death, even the woman whose heart [is] snares and nets, whose hands [are] bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, saith the Preacher, [laying] one thing to another, to find out the account; which my soul still seeketh, but I have not found: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (vers. 15-29).

The Preacher notices like Job a just man suffering to the utmost thereby, and a wicked prolonging his days by his wickedness, and lays down a caution against pushing even good to excess. There is such a thing as being righteous and wise overmuch. Exaggeration is never of God in truth or anything else. It sacrifices other relationships. and exposes to ruin. But righteousness

binds, as spurious wisdom must be shunned: the fear of God guides one safely. Wisdom then strengthens more than mighty allies, bearing in mind too the failure of even a just man, and guarding against sensitiveness to detraction the resources of the mean, as the report of it is of the impudent. Besides, have you never been guilty of it? Lastly, a most touching confession follows (from ver. 28) of the wise man's conscious lack of wisdom. Christ is made wisdom unto us. In Him we find and have what Solomon found altogether beyond him — beyond him how far! a double depth: how could any find it out? He turned, he and his heart, to know and to investigate, to seek wisdom and device, and to know wickedness as folly, and he found a bitterness beyond death in woman when ensnaring with a seductive heart and with hands that keep fast hold. How deeply the king had drunk of this fatal cup! By God's good hand alone could come deliverance: the erring one is taken captive. He that had sought his pleasure there was miserably disappointed: one man in a thousand had he found to his mind, but not a woman. Others have looked to God for one as a helpmate, and not in vain; but not the king who trusted his wisdom and had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines. It was the old, old story: God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices. Life is only a failure where God and His way are forgotten; and the wise made his folly in departing from it more conspicuous. Here he tells the tale sadly for universal profit.

Ecclesiastes 8.

The close of the last chapter is the manifest transition to the beginning here. Bitter to the royal Preacher was his

reflection on an experience he had proved so thoroughly. Nevertheless self-reproach did not lessen his sense of the value of wisdom.

“Who [is] as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man’s wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. [I counsel thee], Keep the king’s command, and [that] in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his presence; persist not in an evil thing: for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him, because the king’s word hath power; and who may say unto him, What dost thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing; and a wise man’s heart discerneth time and judgment: for to every purpose there is a time and judgment; because the misery of man is great upon him: for he knoweth not that which shall be; for who can tell him how it shall be? There is no man that hath power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war: neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there. is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt. And withal I saw the wicked buried, and they came to the grave; and they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city: this also is vanity” (vers. 1-10).

Wisdom is inseparable from the fear of the Lord, its beginning; and consists of entrance into His mind, and thus solves questions otherwise inscrutable in a skein so tangled as man every where offers as he is now. Nor this only; it transfigures himself, be he ever so plain, and changes the strength of his face, bold as it may be by nature. So in the N.T. let your moderation be known to

all men, trying as circumstances may be. Obedience is a first principle, as the Preacher lays down emphatically and this not for wrath but for conscience' sake — the oath of God. Haste to go out of his sight is as dangerous as persisting in an evil; for power is of God, and he wieldeth not the sword in vain. Power from the people is a base falsehood, and a usurpation fatal to those that forget God and His word. Rulers are a terror not to good work but to evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do the good thing, and thou shalt have praise from it, for he is God's minister to thee for good. The wise heart discerns time and judgment: so we see in scripture and prove in daily life, and here dependence on God is invaluable. The king needs it at least as much as his subjects. So Solomon began; not so did he proceed when wealth and honour and pleasure filled his life; but so now in repentance he feels and teaches us all. For every purpose is it requisite; and as the wisdom that discerns time and judgment is rare, so is the misery of man great for the want of foreseeing. For he knows not what is coming and can find none on earth to tell him. Oh, if he but looked up to Him Who knows all and bowed to His will! This is part of divine wisdom and open to all that fear Him in the midst of creature changes, with death the closing scene of man here. Who has control over the spirit, who over the day of death? Where the discharge in that war? Wickedness assuredly shall deliver none given to it. All this had the Preacher seen, and set his heart to all the working which is done under the sun, the time when man ruleth man to his hurt. He had on the one hand seen the wicked buried and gone, and on the other those that had done right gone from the place of the holy and forgotten in the city. This too is vanity, and yet plain fact.

“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil a hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, because they fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his [days], which are as a shadow, because he feareth not before God. There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there are righteous [men], unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him in his labour the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun.

“When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also [there is that] neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because however much a man labour to seek out, yet he shall not find; yea moreover, though a wise man think to know, yet shall he not be able to find” (vers. 11-17).

How vividly and unquestionably a true picture of mankind as they are! Evil abounds and flourishes till the Lord come; yet no less surely the moral government of God secures good to those that fear before Him, and retribution to those that fear Him not: were they to live long, it is but a shadow. Whatever vanity be in that reaching righteous ones according to the doing of the wicked, and to wicked ones according to the working of

the righteous, God is not mocked nor man overlooked. But it is not yet the day when righteous power permits no evil and good openly triumphs? This is reserved for the kingdom, as the kingdom is for Christ appearing in glory and those who suffered with Him then glorified.

Meanwhile the Preacher again praises the thankful acceptance in this mingled scene of what God gives for the life that now is, without perplexity as to its riddles, which escape even such as sleep not day or night: they are beyond man's ken to solve, let him be ever so wise. Christ alone clears up, and. the Spirit sent to dwell in all that are His; for He searches all, yea, the depths of God; but this is lost, just so far as with a divided heart man is trusted.

Ecclesiastes 9.

Things are in no such sort or degree an answer to God's government as to enable any one to draw from present events a just conclusion. Yet the Preacher lays down two axioms beyond dispute: the righteous and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God; yet no man knows either love or hatred — the whole before them. Outwardly there is the one issue alike to all; one thing happens to bad and good.

"For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them. All things [come] alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner,. he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil in all that is done

under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in [their] heart while they live; and, after that, they go to the dead. For to him that is joined with all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. As well their love,. as their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.

“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works. Let thy garments be always white, and let not thy head lack unguent. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labour wherein thou labourest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol whither thou goest” (vers. 1-10).

Conformity to nature, the pride of pagan philosophy, utterly fails. Sin has ruined and confused all things here below. To look to One above the ruin, Who abides the same for ever, was the only wisdom and righteousness; and now that He has revealed Himself in His Son, this is incomparably plainer. Death is the end of all here below; but in Him is life, and those who believe have it in Christ. Before He came death could not but be dreadful: so dim even to the believer was the light beyond. A live dog is better than the lion when dead, he says. Now we can pronounce it gain, and very much better than the

life of this world; for it, is to depart and be with Christ. But of old the present life was the sphere of knowledge and activity, which death closed in darkness. Hence the advice to accept and enjoy thankfully what God gave “all the days of the life of thy vanity.” Heaven is quite out of sight, and awaited His coming down to make it known, Who is now gone up, even the Son of man Who is in heaven, as He could say on the earth. And hence too the call to earnestness in what lay before each Then is pursued from ver. 11 another consideration, not merely an end so dark and imminent, but a course meanwhile so precarious that no advantages can secure.” I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of knowledge; but time and chance happeneth to them all. For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them” (vers. 11, 12). The providential season may never come, without which the swift and the strong, the wise and the prudent and the instructed fail; and ruin ensues, instead of the prize. Is then wisdom useless? Far from it; and this he illustrates in vers. 13-15. “I have also seen wisdom under the sun on this wise, and it seemed great unto me: there was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: and there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.”

The comment is two-fold. “Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. The words of the wise spoken in quiet are heard more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good” (vers. 16-18). Yet this age does not always appreciate. The poor are despised by the first man, not by the Second; and one sinner destroys much good, even though wisdom excels weapons of war.

Ecclesiastes 10.

This chapter, as well as those that follow, differs from those before in dropping almost entirely the language of personal experience, save the close of chap. 12 which fittingly recurs to it as a conclusion of the book. In the rest we have aphoristic remarks confirming the argument of the book: caution against the indulgence of folly even in the smallest thing; and commendations of wisdom in practical affairs, and for every class, subjects or rulers, in public as in private life, in word as well as deed.

“Dead flies cause the ointment (or conserve) of the apothecary to stink [and] putrefy: [so] a little folly him that is valued for wisdom and honour. The heart of a wise one is at his right hand, but a fool’s heart at his left. Yea, also, when the fool walketh by the way, his heart faileth, and he saith to (or of) every one he is a fool” (vers. 1-3).

Men who stand out from their fellows for reputed wisdom are peculiarly exposed to the censoriousness of others far inferior in weight or worth, who cultivate the cheap ability of spying out a flaw to their

disparagement. It is therefore of moment to cut off occasion from such as. seek occasion. For as literally the heart is at the left hand by nature, wisdom gives it figuratively a quite different place for prompt effective action as it is called for. The fool is slow to apprehend the bearing of a principle, and his measures are awkward and vain. More than that, even in the ordinary walk of the day, he never discerns the right thing at the right time, but blurts out his folly at every opening of his mouth to each companion or passer-by.

“If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yieldingness pacifieth great offences. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as an error that proceedeth from the ruler: folly is set in great heights, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen slaves upon horses, and princes walking as slaves upon the earth” (vers. 4-7).

This is an application of wisdom, and an exemplification of folly. The ruler’s towering spirit naturally provokes; but wisdom strengthens propriety to keep the subject place, and, if an answer be called for, to give a soft one. Mere right never rectifies wrong, but the grace that gives up self and serves. And what the great king saw is not an uncommon sight in all ages, and trying enough even to the wise and meek, the error proceeding from the ruler, that exalts the unworthy and that abases the worthy. But wisdom can bow and wait without contention, which would not remedy the evil but add another.

“He that diggeth a pit falleth into it, and whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent biteth him. Whoso moveth stones is hurt therewith; he that cleaveth wood is

endangered (or wounded) thereby. If the iron be blunt, and one do not whet the edge, then must he apply more strength; but wisdom is profitable for success. If the serpent bite without enchantment, then the master of the tongue (or charmer) hath no profit. The words of a wise man's mouth [are] gracious, but the lips of a fool swallow him up. The beginning of his mouth's words is foolishness, and the end of his mouth mischievous madness. But a fool multiplieth words. Man knoweth not what shall be; and what shall be after, who telleth him? The toil of the foolish wearieth him (i.e. each one), for he knoweth not how to go to the city" (vers. 8-15).

The folly of the ruler is apt to awaken reactionary folly among the ruled. Wisdom is not given to change: and here the preacher presents the result which so often ensues on either side. The dug pit, the broken hedge, the removing of stones, and the cleaving of wood, especially with indifferent tools, are all dangerous enterprises, not for others only, but for those that essay them more particularly; none more so than breaking down a landmark whence issues a biting serpent. As wisdom is of profit to direct, so is it to enchant and escape the deadly. As a fool's lips are peculiarly destructive to himself, wise words are grace and minister it to others; instead of being like the words of a fool's mouth, folly at the beginning, and mischievous madness at the end. Nor is there a more frequent sign of a fool than multiplying talk, and resolving to have the last word. For man knows not what shall be even in his own time, still less what is to be after him. The toil of fools is but labour for nought save weariness; they cannot, for very heedlessness, tell the road into the city,

though it would be hard to find anything that needs less intelligence.

Then we have an animated address of woe contrasted with blessing: woe, where a land has for its king a youth in character as well as years, and princes who live for self- indulgence instead of devotedness to their duty; blessing, where the king is bred in noble associations, and his companions cherish aims in accordance with their place. The view is generalised a little; and the danger of petulant speech pressed in closing.

“Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness! By slothfulness the roof sinketh in; and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life; and money answereth all things. Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber; for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter” (vers. 16-20).

Ecclesiastes 11.

In this chapter, or at least its first half, we find not so much warning as exhortation in the dark style of apothegm which the writer delights in.

“Cast thy bread on the face of the waters, for after many days thou shalt find it. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight, for thou knowest not what evil shall be on the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth; aid if the tree fall toward the north and toward the south, in the place where the tree

falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the wind, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the work of God who doeth all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good" (vers. 1-6).

Earlier in the book is shown the folly of setting the heart on any object under the sun; and if any understood more deeply what, is in man and in the world, as the writer in fact did, it is only the more profound sorrow. Receiving what God gives and using it all in His fear is wisdom.

Now the Preacher exhorts to liberal action in assured faith, as he may well do who knows that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. The waters may be unpromising for bread or even bread-corn; but casting in faith at His word is never in vain. One may have to wait many days, but He cannot fail, and thou shalt find it at length. Again, we are surrounded by need. The poor never pass away, as the world is full. The next word is "give a portion to seven," not to one here or another there, but all round where need exists. Even so arrest not that you have to the end; for more need may unexpectedly arise. Therefore he says,, and also to eight." For what does any one know of evil here below? Little indeed; yet we are in an evil world, and for what purpose? Behold the perfection of this in Christ Who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him. Yet was it from a resource above the world, as was plainly proved

when He bade the crafty ensnarer show Him a denarius: He had none, but far better which passes not away.

Whether one look up or down, one may see how God orders on the earth for the help of needy man, constant object of His compassion. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth; and if a tree fall toward the south or toward north, there it shall be. Goodly sights are they both! Yet God turns them to the use of an ungrateful race. Wherever we may be, we too can serve God by helping man in his wants, as Christ did, the perfect Servant no less than perfect Saviour. Never a cry without an answer of goodness, and as ready to act in the wilderness for man's need as if He had not invited His disciples apart there to rest awhile, Himself unwearied in love everywhere.

Nor is it true wisdom to trust one's own prudence, or to be turned aside by objections and difficulties. "He that observeth the wind will not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds will not reap." Whatever may not be, God is; and God's word is plain, as to fear Him is wise. Appearances are meant to try faith in a world departed from God, Who worketh hitherto where all is wrong, instead of keeping sabbath as if all were right. So Christ, to the horror and hatred of all who idolize man and the world as they are, could and did say, "I work" even on the sabbath. So ought those that know Him, with a fresh power, besides the sense that all here is vanity.

It is true that man knows little of the wondrous working or the end of God. Why, what does he know of his own being? To say nothing of that which follows death, with its alarm save for the most hardened of unbelievers, what does he know of what precedes birth? "As thou

knowest not what is the way of the spirit, how the bones [grow] in the womb of her that is with child, even so thou knowest not the work of God who doeth all." But this is no excuse for self-indulgence, no right reason for inertness in the face of appalling need, suffering, sorrow, danger, death, in a world of sin and ruin. It is the louder call to act on His word Who deigns to direct our path in simple faith and earnest love, as we may surely add who confess the Lord Jesus; the spirit of which here dimly led him who saw dimly the Coming One. Therefore follows the word, "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand; for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both [shall be] alike good."

The closing words return to the more wonted strain of chap. 11.

He begins with any, old or young; he winds up with a warning of grave pungent irony to him who in his levity and pride overlooked sin and sorrow, and withdraws for a moment the veil from his coming into God's judgment. Youth and the prime of life, like all the rest here, are vanity. Jesus Christ, we can add, as the blessed contrast for man now, is "the same yesterday and today and for ever," never more manifestly God, the true God, and eternal life, than when He became man and tabernacled among us, full of grace and truth. "Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Ecclesiastes 12.

The last chapter drops the irony so evident just before and urges the solemn truth of judgment, which admitted only of the plainest and gravest appeal. It is accordingly

the admirable conclusion of a book of telling truth (which unbelief readily misreads), but full of serious instruction where faith searches for profit.

“Remember also thy Creator(s) in the days of thy youth before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh of which thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; before the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, be darkened, and the clouds return after the rain: in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the street; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song shall be brought low; yea, they shall be afraid of [that which is] high, and terrors [shall be] in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: before the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; and the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all [is] vanity” (vers. 1-8).

It is an affecting call from early days to set God before the soul on the one hand, and to forget not on the other the frailty of fallen man, with death and judgment its portion, as man is. Although it is the fashion to doubt and deny that there is an allegorical description, in itself it seems manifest, suitable to the writer, and worthy of the inspiring Spirit. There may be difficulty as to every

detail in the application; but this is so true of scripture generally that none need wonder if it be so here.

Ver. 2 expresses external objects and conditions of the greatest power by day or night no longer influencing as they did; then in ver. 3 the infirmity of man's members, once strong to guard or sustain, no less than the feebler ones, so necessary for the nourishment of the body, and the perception of things great or small. Then in ver. 4 is described the failure of human powers for action or speech in public, or to revive what gave pleasure once; while ver. 5 represents the growing inability and fears and decay. The sign of old age is the hoary head and the shrinking from burden or effort, betokening the approach of the grave, with its accompaniments, when the internal powers all fail, and the body returns to its kindred dust, the spirit to Him Who breathed His immortalising breath into man alone on earth. So pungent a description of human decay, where the word of God is honoured, may well warn of the danger of deferring) the heed due to Him from such as we are. If fallen man, made in God's image, sink into infirmities more overwhelming than any creatures set under him in God's order, what folly to defer the prime wisdom of fearing God!

"And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, [and] set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and [that which was] written uprightly, [even] words of truth. The words of the wise [are] as goads, and as nails well fastened are the words of the masters of assemblies, [which] are given from one shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by them; of making many books

[there is] no end; and much study [is] a weariness of the flesh. [This is] the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this [is] the whole [duty] of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether [it be] good or whether [it be] evil" (vers. 9-14).

It is not surprising that in a growingly self-complacent rationalistic age men should think themselves competent to question the wisdom of the Preacher, and his acceptable words. To such the words of the wise cannot be goads; their fatal self-sufficiency makes them pitfalls or stumbling-blocks. To the faithful they are words of truth, and the collections of them as nails fastened in. They are given from one shepherd, and the reader fails not to be warned by them. Of the many books of man there is no end, and their study is but weariness of the flesh.

But one thing is needful, as our Saviour said; and the royal Preacher pointed to the same conclusion. "Let us hear the end of the whole matter," and forget it not. "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Christ alone, while confirming this, gives us far more as in Him, and lets us into heavenly things, and the divine nature in a way then impossible to be known and enjoyed. But to fear and obey Him is ever right. "For God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or whether evil."

1 The discrepancies in translations are here extraordinary. "Wagons and chariots" says J. Leeser; as others "wife and concubines"; the LXX. "a butler, and female cupbearers"; the Vulgate, "pitchers and vases" and so one might run on rather wearyingly.