

# The Eternal God Is Our Refuge: A Brief Commentary on Ecclesiastes

By G. Wolff

## Chapter I

### The Words of the Teacher, Son of David, King in Jerusalem (1)

The word ‘Ecclesiastes’ means ‘preacher’ or leader of the assembly. In spite of the counterarguments of many theologians it is our conviction that Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, did write this book. Solomon had received an unusual measure of wisdom from God as is recorded in 1 Kings 3, 12: “I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.” In that same book of the Bible we also read: “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the east, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five” (1 Kgs 4:30–34). One of the objections raised in this connection is that the task of teaching was the province of the priests, the Levites and the prophets. However, Solomon, like his father David, possessed extraordinary gifts and it is inconceivable that a king who was known for his wisdom among the neighboring nations and for his considerable literary productions (the major part of which is no longer extant), would not share that wisdom with his own people. Consider the magnificent prayer spoken by Solomon at the dedication of the temple which is recorded in the eighth chapter of 1 Kings.

The principal truth which Solomon wishes to inculcate throughout this entire book is expressed at the very outset and repeated at the close: everything is meaningless or as the Authorized Version puts it: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Obviously, all men do not possess the wisdom of Solomon, even as all men do not possess the wisdom necessary to appreciate Solomon’s wisdom. Many suppose that Solomon was a pessimist, an Epicurean, or even an atheist because of his statement that all is vanity, and that man should, without a care, simply enjoy those possessions that he actually has. Who, I ask you, are those people who accuse the Preacher (Teacher, NIV) of pessimism, of taking a dim view of things? They are precisely the same people who cling to the goods and pleasures of this present world and who hope to find in them true happiness. It surely is a shock to them to be told that all this is vanity. The Hebrew word translated *vanity* in the Authorized Version and *meaningless* in the NIV literally means *exhalation, puff of breath*. One cannot better describe the substance of this world and human activity than as being a puff of air, a fleeting exhalation. Basically an exhalation is very insubstantial, almost nothing; something which passes quickly and then is gone, leaving behind not even a trace. And all remains as it was before.

Moreover, Solomon was not the only one to say that. The vanity of all earthly things is a consequence of death which, as a result of sin, has invaded our world. Solomon is merely applying this truth to all earthly life. He is explaining what is implied in the words found in Genesis 3:17, 19: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil will you eat of it all the days of your life.... for dust you are, and unto dust you will return.”

### What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? (3)

No man succeeds in procuring for himself a real advantage, an enduring gain, joy, or lasting happiness despite all his efforts. Death deprives him of everything, and he is left with absolutely nothing. It is not only Solomon who utters this truth; it is proclaimed throughout Scripture. Moses in his day said: “You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning—though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered” (Ps 90:5, 6). Likewise David: “Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie” (Ps 62:9). Yes, man is a mere phantom as he moves through life. He bustles about, but all in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it (Ps 39:6). And hear what the Apostle James says: “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

Why do Solomon and all the holy writers insist on the vain nature of all life and all human activity on this earth? It is only so that men do not cling to this vain and fleeting life, but rather to that which is eternal and immovable. This realization accounts for our title: *The Eternal God Is Our Refuge*. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten SON, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Through faith in Jesus Christ, his only Son, God wishes to preserve us and lead us to eternal life. All that God does for our salvation is NOT a vain puff of breath, and it is in order that we may seek our refuge in Christ, who has eternal life, that we must realize the vanity of all that exists apart from him and his salvation. But to believe in Christ we must first of all recognize that all that we are, all that we do and possess on this earth, within the domain of this present life, is only a puff of breath which quickly passes away and disappears.

Having spoken of the individual, Solomon now refers to the succession of generations in which some indeed would see a semblance of duration.

#### **Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever (4).**

A generation, an aggregation of men born at about the same time, growing up together, attaining the peak of their strength, finally descend the ladder of life and return to dust. Meanwhile a new generation has seen the light of day, has run through the same life cycle. Thus there is a continuous succession of generations, each of which experiences in turn birth and a passage through life terminating in death. Meanwhile the earth always remains what it is: a domain where sin and death reign. All human activity resembles nothing so much as a wheel that is constantly turning, turning incessantly. But not the wheel of a vehicle moving ahead! No, rather a waterwheel constantly in one place. This tireless activity, devoid of any real progress, is now illustrated in terms of three natural phenomena: the sun, the wind and rivers. The course of the sun begins in the east only to disappear in the west. Then it resumes its course at the same point and traverses the same circuit. The wind coming from the north blows to the south and returns to the north to move southward once more. The evaporated water falling on the earth in the form of rain will feed springs which in turn give rise to rivers flowing into the sea. These are some of the elements in the universe which day after day run their circular course, ever in movement, but always returning to the same place. These considerations cause Solomon to come to the general conclusion:

#### **All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, or the ear its fill of hearing (8).**

The entire universe is one immense assemblage of innumerable elements, each running its course, the course God has prescribed for it, and meshing with the whole to assure its functioning. No man, no human being, can adequately describe this huge “machine.” Solomon now mentions the ear and the eye, those marvelous organs man needs to recognize what is occurring in the universe so as to adapt himself to it. The universe itself is also an immense wheel, ever turning. And since all is in perpetual motion the eye never sees the whole, nor does the ear hear all during man’s lifetime on this earth. So man’s eye and ear are also engaged in tireless movement.

And what now is the final conclusion Solomon arrives at? Since the entire universe is also an immense wheel, composed of an infinite number of other wheels, ever turning, but never changing their places, and always arriving at the same place? His conclusion?—Things are always the same; there is nothing new under the sun.

**What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow (9–11).**

At this point one is tempted to contradict Solomon. Nothing that is new? What about new discoveries and the scientific and technological inventions of the age? The steam engine, the internal combustion engine? The railroad, the airplane; satellites and rockets moving at dizzying speeds; electricity and all its applications? Are all these not new things which no one in Solomon's day ever dreamed of? Yes, all these things are relatively new; they were never heard of in Solomon's day. But have they really renewed the universe and human life on it? Have they removed sin, unhappiness, oppression and death? Have they given man lasting happiness? The earth down to this very day is still the domain of sin and death!

True, we have the historical accounts of times past, of nations and of civilizations that no longer exist. But what has the present generation learned from them? This history is deposited in books, but the experience of past generations is forgotten. No one takes notice of it. Every generation starts out on the ruins of the preceding one, constructing its own temple of happiness only to end up in the midst of its own ruins, layered on those of the preceding generation. Each generation forgets the faults and stalemates of the past generation, and future generations will not benefit from the experiences of our generation. It is that same wheel, turning, but not advancing. There is nothing new under the sun. There is only one single thing that is new, and that is why Solomon is so insistent on the vanity of human life on this earth. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). That is a really new thing. Christ brings us a new life which will continue to progress till the moment comes when he will create a new heaven and a new earth concerning which one will be able to say: "Old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor 5:17; Re 21:1-14).

Solomon has thus demonstrated in his introduction the absolute vanity of everything that happens on earth under God's sun, provided one makes an exception in connection with the spiritual and eternal life, created by God in Jesus Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This life remains in all eternity; yes, in eternity it reaches its full development. But all the rest is but a puff of breath which passes away and is lost in oblivion.

### **I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem (12).**

When Ecclesiastes writes, "I was king over Israel in Jerusalem," this is not proof, as some would have it, that the book was *not* written by Solomon. Since he was king until his death, they argue, he would have had to write "I *am* king over Israel." But the manner of speaking in the past concerning one's own person and experience is simply an indication that Solomon wrote toward the end of his life after a long reign filled with rich experiences. He is addressing *future* generations concerning those experiences and the wisdom he has gained. The results are in part negative, having the same stamp everything has under the sun, something he states at the very outset: all is vanity, a pursuit of the wind.

### **I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind (13, 14).**

Humanity is similar to an immense anthill, each inhabitant scouring about yet collaborating with the whole. No one can live in isolation without concern about others. All must collaborate, live and act in a group: in the family and in all sorts of enterprises. However, to accomplish one's task within this aggregation, wisdom is required in order to estimate the behavior of others and to determine how, as an individual, one can integrate one's activity into that of the whole.

Now Solomon passes a very strange judgment on the activity springing from human wisdom when he says, "What a heavy burden God has laid on men!" We might ask why the study of human society is a burden for man. Solomon's answer is:

## **What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted (15).**

Just what do these words mean? Solomon certainly does not mean to say that a blacksmith cannot straighten out a rod on his forge, or that a rich benefactor cannot fill the empty purse of a poor man with silver. Solomon is speaking of things that are so hopelessly twisted that no man can straighten them out; of things that are hopelessly lacking that no man can count or replace them. He is speaking of the state humanity finds itself in since the fall, totally depraved by sin, and totally lacking the gift of righteousness and holiness which God conferred on man at creation. He is only repeating what we find stated throughout the Scriptures.

Thus Ecclesiastes says in chapter 7:29: "God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." Hear what Jeremiah says: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. What can understand it?" (17:9).

The Apostle Paul gives a frightful description of the perverseness of man and his total lack of righteousness in the well-known Romans passage: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have all become worthless; there is no one that does good, not even one.... Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.... Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.... Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.... there is no fear of God before their eyes" (3:10–18).

Here we have an explanation of Solomon's words that the human heart is so perverted since the fall that no man can straighten it out. We express the same truth when we say that the righteousness which it lacks cannot be "counted"; indeed, it is totally lacking in the righteousness and holiness with which God adorned it at creation. That is why when one *wisely* studies all that occurs under the sun, one arrives at the conclusion that all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. The disintegration and disorganization of all human society has its origin in sin. Men are obliged to live together, to interact, to form groups such as the family, agricultural, industrial and commercial enterprises, even nations, in which each must work together with the other for the good of the whole. However, this cooperation is vitiated by sin; what prevails is injustice, oppression, disorder, quarrels, murders, wars, fraud, violence and, every sort of vice which undermines the well-being of society. The scientific progress and technology of which man boasts do not make mankind better or happier.

**I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief (16–18).**

Solomon had not only received extraordinary wisdom from God, but he also had the opportunity and possibility of utilizing such wisdom, of probing, with that wisdom, everything that occurred under the skies, of struggling against stupidity and folly, of effecting a triumph of wisdom when used in keeping with God's will.

He ruled an immense empire which extended from the Euphrates to the borders of Egypt, and he had diplomatic relations with all the surrounding countries. But his experience showed him that it was not divine wisdom which held sway in the hearts of men directing their thoughts and actions, but rather folly and sinful perverseness. He did all he could to cause wisdom to reign and to extirpate the folly of sin, but finally had to confess that this, too, was chasing the wind, an endeavor that led nowhere. The wiser a man is, the more he realizes what a rare thing wisdom is, and how much folly holds sway among men, even within his own sinful flesh. Thus in the same measure that he grows in wisdom, his own chagrin increases in view of how rare true wisdom is and how folly dominates men.

However, there is one whose wisdom is infinitely superior to that of Solomon, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3), who has become for us wisdom from God, i.e., our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). How was such wisdom received? Christ had to reproach his people on that score: "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one

greater than Solomon is here” (Mt 12:42). Jesus came into this world, a light and wisdom, to dispel the darkness of folly, but the darkness would have none of him. “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (Jn 3:19). Still today wisdom exhorts men: “Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Mt 7:13, 14).

## **Chapter II**

### **The Vanity of Earthly Possessions and Pleasures**

Now Solomon continues to expound in detail the principal truth of this whole book: All is vanity. This means that all human activity on this earth, all possessions and all earthly joys are only a puff of breath of short duration which disappears without leaving any trace, without affording any advantage or lasting satisfaction. He has demonstrated the vanity, the fleeting nature of human wisdom, and now he sets about to underscore the vanity of earthly possessions and their enjoyment.

**I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good” (1).**

Let us not misunderstand Solomon’s thought here. He already knew previously that true happiness is not to be found in the enjoyment of the possessions and pleasures of this earth. The prayer that he addressed to God upon assuming royal power clearly gives evidence of this: “So God said to him, ‘Since you have not asked ... for long life or wealth for yourself, nor for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice ...’ ” (1 Kg 3:10, 11). But Solomon was minded to experience personally what he already knew. It was for this reason that he thought in his heart, “I will test you with pleasure,” that is to say, I shall give you the opportunity to test, to experience that earthly joys are vanity. Thus we, too, are taught in our youth that all joys and all earthly possessions are shadowy, but we still have not as yet experienced that. This will follow during the course of our lives as we taste and experience the joys of this earthly life.

Before enumerating these possessions and joys, Solomon states right at the outset the result of his experience in this matter:

**But that also proved to be meaningless. Laughter, I said, is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish? (1b, 2).**

We must not type Solomon as a gloomy pessimist who, out of hand, completely rejects all laughter and all joy. He himself says, “There is a time to laugh, there is a time to dance” (3:4). Here he is addressing himself to men who are seeking real happiness in the laughter and joys of this world, and whose only thought is to laugh and enjoy earthly pleasures. This is actually the case with the children of the fallen, unbelieving world. In their case laughter is folly and their pleasures serve no real purpose since they are already under condemnation, not knowing the way of salvation. On the contrary, the true children of God do not chase after laughter and pleasure, but accept them as they come their way as passing gifts which God bestows on them during their earthly pilgrimage without attaching their hearts to them and not seeking in them their true lasting happiness. Jesus Christ is their joy and happiness. Seeking happiness in laughter and in the pleasures of this world is, in effect, foolishness and vanity.

Next Solomon gives a detailed description of his experience with the possessions and pleasures of this life. He starts out by saying:

**I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives (3).**

The Authorized Version's "give myself unto wine" leaves one with the impression that Solomon was a drunkard, whereas he himself states in Proverbs 31:4, 6: "It is not for kings to drink wine ... lest they drink and forget what the law decrees and deprive all the depressed of their rights." Then he adds: "Give wine to those who are in anguish." And in Psalm 104:15 he says that wine gladdens the heart of man. The Hebrew verb signifies: attract, harden, invigorate, stimulate, amuse, divert. Solomon made wise use of wine so as to be able to accomplish with good spirit the works he has decided upon and also to gladden his heart. He embraced what he terms folly, i.e., the goods and pleasures of this world, only to discover terms of his own experience that this too is vanity.

**I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water flourishing trees. I bought male and female servants and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure (4–10a).**

In conclusion Solomon sets down the result of his experiences:

**My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (10b–11).**

Solomon expresses profound truth. The pleasure that we achieve in acquiring earthly goods is part of the earthly well-being and happiness which God grants us. However, when our labor is finished and the possessions have been acquired, the joy that we experience regarding such possessions diminishes and finally disappears altogether and death deprives us of all the advantages we might have derived from these earthly possessions. Consequently all is vanity, shadowy and the eternal God is the only good which can be ours for all eternity.

### **Chapter III God's Involvement in Human Affairs**

Thus far Solomon has shown the vanity of all human and earthly activity. All that man does and accomplishes is like a fleeting puff of wind that leaves no trace and which affords man no real and lasting happiness. But this is only one aspect of human life and it is not even the principal one. It is human life, one might say, seen from an earthly point of view. There is another aspect of human life, human life viewed from above, viewed as constituting a part of God's acting in human affairs, and this is, when one comes right down to it, the main aspect. God created man for his glory and even after man's fall into sin, God continues to rule over men and to direct their lives with His almighty power to serve his glory.

**There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven (1).**

God, the Creator of the universe, envelops in his almighty power all human life and with it all its activities and all earthly happenings. "In him we live, move and have our being" (Ac 17:28). "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Ro 11:36).

He has also established time, though he himself is not subject to it, existing, as he does, in eternity. Thus he has fixed a time for the beginning, the duration and the end of every event and of every human activity. It is not chance, nor the will of man, but the will of God which governs all things. This almighty will of God is at work in all men, in the good and in the evil. However, man is at a loss to comprehend how God's will squares

with human responsibility. The wicked, too, accomplish God's will unwittingly and involuntarily. The most striking example of this is the death of Jesus Christ. Consider the prayer of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem: "Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you appointed" (Ac 4:27). And Peter in his sermon to the people of Israel said: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Ac 2:23). Yet the Jews bear the full responsibility for their crime. They were cut to the heart, and upon asking Peter and the other apostles what they should do under the circumstances, they were told: "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Ac 2:37, 38).

Having, first of all, affirmed the general truth that there is a time for everything (stating, in effect, that everything happens with the foreknowledge of God and according to his fixed plan, in other words, according to divine providence), Solomon goes into detail and enumerates fourteen pairs of events or acts involving man. Each pair is a contrast between a destructive or negative act along with a corresponding positive or constructive one. Solomon thus demonstrates that human life is not a confused mixture of things, good and bad, due to chance and occurring higgledy-piggledy in utter confusion, but rather that everything happens at a time fixed by God and serves in effecting his plan, which is hidden from us, but concerning which the Bible assures us that it promotes his glory and our happiness.

Solomon starts out by mentioning two contrasting events which frame all human life, that of every single individual and that of humanity in general.

### **There is a time to be born and a time to die (2).**

One might object at this point and say that, in a certain sense, birth and death also depend upon the will of man. Man can prevent a birth, and contrary to the will of God, he can also take a life. When a man falls ill and refuses to consult a doctor and take medicines that might cure him, and as a consequence dies, we say that that man has shortened his life. On the other hand, when a sick person takes care of himself we say that such medical treatment has prolonged his life. God prolonged the life of King Hezekiah (Is 38:1-8; 2 Kg 20:1-11). It is necessary to distinguish between the almighty will of God which effects all things and his revealed will, known only to his children. His will which is operative in all things can become known to us only after the fact. Our lives must be led according to the revealed will of God. Thus when we are ill, we would not refuse to consult a physician, and not do as certain sects urge, saying, "If God wants to cure me, I shall get well without a physician." No, we should use all the means that God has placed at our disposal to preserve our life, but also place our trust in God, believing that he will do what serves his glory and promotes our salvation. We should certainly not question the power of prayer on the basis of the premise that everything happens according to God's will anyway. We do not know his complete will, and if he commands us to pray as he certainly does and promises to hear us, why then our prayer and his hearing our prayer are surely included in His all-powerful will.

All other occurrences and activities are now included under being born and dying: everything on this earth is either supportive of life or inimical to it. In this sense Solomon mentions three pairs of activity, each of which serves to preserve life and the goods man possesses on this earth, while their opposites tend to destroy these.

### **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 (2, 3).**

Planting is one of the principal and basic activities of man, for vegetation is basic to human and animal life. On the other hand, there also comes a time when one must uproot that which has been planted, e.g., when plants become too old, they must be replaced by new ones. The following pair touch on life more immediately: there is a time when one must kill in order to defend oneself against the enemy who invades our country or to punish a murderer. The opposite is also true: there is a time which calls for healing to preserve life. One earthly

good necessary for life is a habitation; there is then a time when we should construct one, but there is also a time when it must be destroyed, having become old and dilapidated, or even dangerous.

The following two pairs mention contrasting sentiments of the human heart:

**A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance (4).**

There is a time for man to express his sorrow and a time for him to express his joy. It is evident that circumstances which give rise to sorrow or joy occur in keeping with God's will.

The statements that follow have a bearing on relationships between men. "Scattering stones" probably refers to a custom described in 2 Kings 13:19 where we read that God ordered the Israelites to punish the Moabites: "You will stop up all the springs and ruin every good field with stones." On the contrary, where there is a mention of gathering stones, it is a matter of the opposite: clearing a field in preparation for cultivation.

Other contrasting activities in our lives, the time of which God determines, are embracing and refraining from an embrace; searching for something and the loss of it; keeping and discarding; tearing and mending; being silent and speaking out; loving and hating; and finally events involving an entire people: a time for war and a time for peace.

Thus Solomon teaches us that life is not just an uninterrupted succession of joys and happiness. It is rather a continual rotation of contradictory phenomena: birth and death, happiness and misfortune; joy and sorrow; peace and war. He also shows us that these phenomena are not due to chance, but that each appears at a time determined by God.

Now the question arises:

**What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid upon men. 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 (9–11).**

The conclusion human reason arrives at is this: Since everything that happens is determined by God, why take the trouble to work and what does man derive from his toilsome work? Solomon's answer is that God has commanded man to work, even to work hard and to use his physical and intellectual faculties so that he may learn to be humble before his God, realizing that everything happens not according to his own plans and will, but rather according to God's will and design. God makes everything beautiful in its time. Man, to be sure, often sees only misery and wretchedness, but from God's vantage point everything is done according to his plan, everything serving a useful and salutary purpose for man, and at the same time enhances God's glory. What an abominable crime, the crucifixion of Christ! Yet it serves to redeem sinners. In an instance where men committed a crime, God did a beautiful thing, working something which serves to his eternal glory and to the salvation of those who trust him.

God has also put into the heart of man that there is an eternal life. God himself is eternal and man is destined to eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. It is simply because man's reason is limited by time that he cannot grasp and understand the work and activity of God from the beginning to the end. That activity begins in eternity and ends in eternity. Man, however, is called upon to place his confidence in God and await eternity in order to comprehend the ways of God from beginning to end, and while he waits he must content himself with the fragments of revealed truth God offers him in his Word. In eternity man will see that all the works of God are beautiful and magnificent.

**I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in his toil—this is the gift of God (12, 13).**

Solomon is not an epicurean, who is seeking his happiness in this world's pleasures, but he is no ascetic either, who is depriving himself of the joys and pleasures God offers men on this earth. Nor is he a pessimist



seeing only misery and wretchedness and abandoning himself to despair. He is a true child of God, content with the joys and pleasures God grants him on this earth. These he accepts with gratitude and love toward his heavenly Father, as undeserved gifts. He also knows that evil days are included in God's plan, serving the useful purpose of testing our love for God, and knows too that in eternity we shall see that everything has served God's glory.

Solomon wraps up this profound truth by saying:

**I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, so men will revere him. Whatever is has already been and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account (14, 15).**

Solomon here underscores the difference between God and man, between the works of God and those of man. Man is a time-bound creature in all his activity; he is like a fleeting breath, and this too has its effect on his activities. It is not so with the eternal God and his activity. His works are the execution of his eternal decrees and are carried out as he decreed them in eternity. No one can add anything to them or detract anything from them. Whatever has already existed in the decree of God, and whatever will be, already exists in his eternal decree. God brings back the past, i.e., what in the eyes of time-bound man is past, exists as present in the eternal decree of God. God acts in this way so that man may fear him, so that man may humble himself before him and realize that he is not an independent creature, but that he exists solely by the will of the eternal God who can be his eternal refuge.

### **Defectors From God, Men Are Like Beasts**

In continuing, Solomon describes the relationships that exist among men. This too is vanity for it is God, the Creator, who effects all things according to his will. True, there are often shocking contradictions between the activities of men and the revealed will of God. Solomon mentions one of these:

**And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there; in the place of justice—wickedness was there (16).**

Since the fall, in which men have lost the justice and innocence with which God endowed them, human nature is dominated by injustice. Man does not recoil from crime, nor from inflicting wrong on his neighbor if he imagines that he can profit thereby. This is why every nation has seen the necessity of establishing seats of justice, courts, presided over by judges whose duty it is to punish injustice and to protect the just and the innocent. But, says Solomon, "I have seen places of judgment and wickedness reigns there,"—the judges sparing the criminal and condemning the just because they benefit from such wickedness. In this instance too, there are theologians who claim this book could not have been written by Solomon, for the conditions described here are not in accord with his own rule which was marked by extraordinary wisdom and great national prosperity. However, these objections rest on an illusion. They fail to recognize the total corruption of human nature. We would rather say that, on the contrary, Solomon's words testify to the true state of affairs, for no king or prince, no matter what his rule is like, succeeds completely in suppressing all injustice and in establishing perfect justice. Not even Solomon with all his wisdom was able to eliminate all the wicked and establish a reign of perfect justice. Just read the history of his father David. He did not succeed in disentangling himself from all the wicked, and he himself was guilty of injustice.

The existence of injustice is an offense to human reason, especially when one considers that God is somehow involved in all human activity. The unbelievers say, "If there is an all-powerful and just God, why does he not prevent this reign of injustice, and why does he not immediately bear down on the wicked with his punishments for the injustices they commit?"

Solomon's first reply to this question is:

**I thought in my heart, “God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed” (17).**

Indeed, God has his reasons, known only to himself, why he permits injustice to reign in certain places and during a certain period of time, but he fixed a definite time to judge the just and the unjust. This judgment takes place in part already on this earth, but above all there is “the day of God’s wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed, and God will give to each person according to what he has done” (Ac 17:31).

But why the period of waiting which seems so long to us timebound men? Solomon replies:

**I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like animals” (18).**

Indeed, impious men, defectors from God, dominated by injustice, act toward each other as wild beasts do. “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.... Their feet are swift to shed blood; and ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.... There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Ro 3:14–18). Yes, men in their natural state without God, are like wild beasts, without any concept of justice and injustice.

And this is a source of another aspect of this similarity between men and beasts:

**Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from the dust, and to the dust all return (19, 20).**

These words are adduced to reproach Solomon with being a materialist who does not believe that there is any real difference between men and animals, who denies the existence of an immortal soul and of a life after death. What is the real state of affairs? Solomon clearly distinguishes between the body of an animal and that of man, both of which are reduced to dust, but in man’s case, the soul returning to God who gave it, when he writes: “And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). When Solomon says regarding men and beasts “they all have the same breath,” he is speaking of the natural and animal life which animates the bodies of men as it does those of beasts and which disappears in death. Elsewhere the Scriptures make similar statements: “When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:29, 30). In the account of the Flood we read: “Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died” (Gn 7:22). Consequently it is necessary to distinguish between natural life which animates the body during its earthly life and spiritual life which animates the resurrected and glorified body. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). Therefore when Solomon speaks of the equality existing between men and beasts, he is not indicating a total equality, but only a partial and relative one. Solomon is simply speaking of that which one sees, but not of that which we Christians believe to exist invisibly. What one sees is that man’s body is reduced to dust, and that the life which animated it has disappeared. In this regard there is an equality between man and beast, and the former is not superior in this regard to the latter.

But this equality is only a partial one. Solomon does not deny that man has a soul or spirit. (These two terms are often equivalents, as, e.g., in Luke 1:46, 47). Nor does he deny that this soul is the factor making man a responsible being, and which exists after death to be reunited with man’s glorified body. For despite the denial of liberal theologians this was the conviction of Old Testament believers. We have already quoted Solomon’s statement: “The spirit returns to God who gave it.” We also read that the patriarchs were gathered to their people after their death, and it is Jesus who adduces those statements to prove the resurrection of the dead, as signifying the reuniting of body and soul by quoting the words which God addressed to Moses: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” and adds his interpretation: “God is not a God of the dead, but of the living.”

Solomon speaks of visible realities and not of realities that are invisible, but which we Christians nevertheless believe because they are attested to in God's word. When a man dies, all that one can see is that life has left his body and that that body returns to dust, even as do the bodies of all animals. No one has ever seen a soul apart from a body. It is for this reason that Solomon poses the question:

**Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth? (21).**

Some of the philosophers of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle among them, held that the soul of man was immortal, while not in agreement as to its actual state and fate. Rohde in *Psyche* II, 277 sums it up this way that a few favorites of the gods were carried away to the Elysian Fields, and a few very wicked men were punished in Tartarus, while most of the dead led a shadowy existence in Erebus (i.e., gloom). Plato's was a lone voice that held out the hope that the vast mass might through a series of reincarnations be purified of their evil passions and eventually be free from the shackles of the body. But these opinions are just that, lacking in solid assurance, for the ancient pagans believed neither that man's nature was totally corrupted by sin, nor that death was the wages of sin. Besides, they had no inkling of an eternal salvation made available by the Son of God and revealed to the patriarchs and prophets.

This is the reason that Solomon, in the question posed, does not express any doubt or ignorance on his part, but the doubt and ignorance of natural fallen man, who is under the domination of sin, and hence subject to death. Thus man's fate is seen to resemble that of the beast and to be in no way superior. Even the death of a believing Christian is not visibly different from that of an unbeliever. This is a salutary humiliation intended to remind the believer of what he is by nature and that it is only because of Jesus Christ and faith in him that his corruptible body will be raised incorruptible.

Till that glorious hour comes the words of Solomon retain their value:

**So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? (22).**

One must be on one's guard not to equate these words of Solomon with those of the impious who say, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32; Is 22:13). Unbelievers speak this way because they believe neither in God, nor in a life after death. Children of God, on the other hand, regard the fruits of their labors as a blessing from God which they accept and enjoy with gratitude and love toward their heavenly Father, who has bestowed it upon them. To despise such benefits would be an act of ingratitude toward God. Indeed, when we allow such blessings to slip through our hands without enjoying them, we must remember that we cannot, a second time, return to this earth and recapture them, if we neglected them while they were within reach. There is no need to despise spiritual blessings and eternal life, which Christ has acquired for us through His suffering and death, in order to enjoy all the better the goods and pleasures which God grants us in this life. On the contrary, such temporal blessings should make us appreciative of God's boundless kindness toward us, unworthy though we are, and lead us to conclude that if God is so kind to us already on this earth, showering us with material and earthly blessings, how much greater, how infinitely much greater, will his goodness be which we shall enjoy in eternal glory.

#### **Chapter IV**

#### **For All, High and Low, Life Is Vanity**

In the preceding chapter Solomon described the vanity of human life resulting from injustice and wickedness prevalent among men, and which, to the eye, cause men to seem like wild beasts that rend each other, both man and beast returning to the dust. In chapter four, Solomon by means of a few details illustrates the vanity of human life.

**Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and how they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun (1–3).**

Here Solomon is speaking not of the vanity of those who commit injustice, but rather of the vanity to which all the victims of injustice and violence are subjected. It is especially the poor and the weak who are oppressed. The prophets often speak of widows and orphans who have need of aid, and who are refused that aid. Isaiah reproaches the leaders of his people on this score: “Your rulers . . . do not defend the cause of the fatherless: the widow’s case does not come before them” (1:23). On the other hand, he exhorts them: “Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (1:17). Solomon has to see the tears of these oppressed and becomes aware of the fact that they have no comforter, no one to deliver them out of the hands of their oppressors and this grieves and afflicts him. Under the circumstances he regards the dead who no longer have to witness this, or suffer these ills, blessed. Even more blessed, he says, are those not yet born and who consequently do not have to experience this at all.

But one might object and say to Solomon: Does not Psalm 146 say that God delivers out of such distress? There we read: “He upholds the cause of the oppressed . . . , he sustains the fatherless and the widows, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.” Besides, when Solomon considers those blest who are not yet born, are not these words very much like those of Job who cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:3)? Or like those of Jeremiah: “Cursed be the day I was born” (20:14)? Is not this reproaching God for permitting men to be born, and for subjecting them to suffering rather than leaving them in a happy unborn state? Those who have enjoyed relative ease in this life and who have neither witnessed the sufferings Solomon saw, nor experienced the tribulations of a Job or of a Jeremiah, will be at a loss to understand the utterances of these men. To prefer non-existence to a painful existence, is this not rebellion against God? In this connection we must remember that man was created for life and not for death. Included in this, then, is the desire to live and to enjoy the blessings which are part of man’s life according to the Creator’s will. Hence the natural will of man is to revolt against suffering and death. The believing Christian, however, humbles himself before the will of God and says: “Thy will be done.” With the apostle he says that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:3). However, it is not by his own power, but solely by the aid of the Comforter, the Divine Comforter, that he succeeds in bending his will in conformity to that of God. Yes, the child of God also experiences within himself this revolt against suffering. This is what Solomon would have us understand. For man *per se*, as he is by nature, and lacking the aid of the Holy Spirit, a life of suffering and oppression is futile, and non-existence would be preferable.

Another futility is mentioned:

**And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (4).**

Solomon also notices that the man who works assiduously and wisely at setting up an enterprise, at becoming rich and powerful, at attaining to a high social position, is motivated in such hectic activity by nothing but ambition and envy. He wants to do better than others and he boasts of his superiority. In acting thus, he fires the same ambition and envy in others. They strain to do better, to outdo the one who served them as an example. In this way, part of mankind is dominated by ambition and envy, each afraid that the other may amass more riches, power and honor than himself. So men pass through life expending their strength in a constant struggle for superiority. This too is vanity and a pursuit of the wind for they are never satisfied, never achieving a peaceful enjoyment of the goods God accords them, since their eyes are always fixed on their competitor who has a little more than they have.

Solomon now introduces the very opposite of this evil and consuming envy, indolence:

### **The fool folds his hands and ruins himself (5).**

The lazy man does no work of consequence for anyone, not even for himself. He consumes his own flesh, as it were, and if he persists in indolence, he will die of hunger. This too is vanity. At this point, Solomon sets down a useful rule which the man of God should observe who seeks to observe the middle ground between envious, overriding ambition and indolence which makes a man a burden to others:

### **Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind (6).**

Indeed, the lot of the man who works diligently, but who also from time to time permits himself the necessary rest to regain his strength is certainly wiser than the one who wears himself out in unceasing toil in an effort to amass great riches or to attain a high social position. The former will perhaps not become rich, but he will have his daily fare and will be in a better position to enjoy life, while the man alluded to in the second part of the verse may perhaps accumulate a great fortune, but his life will be marked by constant agitation and strain, and he will not be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

**Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. “For whom am I toiling?” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” This too is meaningless—a miserable business! (7, 8).**

Another example of vanity: the life of a man who is alone, without relatives, but who is a miser and cannot stop working and monopolizing riches, which no person can enjoy, not even himself. Inevitably he must ask himself: “For whom am I actually toiling?” And then he realizes the futility, the vanity of all his efforts.

From the loneliness of the miser who lives only for himself Solomon passes on to a consideration of loneliness in general and shows how deplorable the situation of a man is who is all alone and what an advantage there is in the companionship of at least another:

**Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one fall down his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (9–12).**

Solomon’s words call to mind what God spoke at the beginning of creation: “It is not good for man to be alone” (Ge 2:18). One cannot state definitely in this case that Solomon was thinking of a marital union, yet a marriage is certainly an excellent example of the advantage of association and cooperation between two human beings. They share the fruits of their labor; sleeping together, they can warm each other, something which was especially important in Palestine where the nights are cold. And then Solomon enlarges this cooperation to three: if three live together and help each other, the benefit derived from such cooperation is even greater. In brief, man should not live in isolation, but rather in society. The individual should contribute to the well-being of society, and society should have a care for the well-being of the individual. The apostle gives a useful exhortation in this respect: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited (Ro 12:10, 16).

Unfortunately in this world corrupted by sin this brotherly cooperation is extremely rare. What happens is either that an individual endowed with unusual energy establishes a dictatorship in which others are oppressed, or that a group of several strong spirits impose their collective will on individuals. However, among Christians, mutual brotherly assistance should be readily available: all are members of one body of which Christ

is the head. Hence, a Christian should not dwell apart, but seek and obtain aid and support from his brothers and sisters in the faith in every kind of material and spiritual distress and trouble.

**Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (13–16).**

Finally Solomon points out that vanity reigns at the very top of the social order, among those who govern. There are kings too old to govern, for they no longer accept the advice given them. They suffer from hardening of the arteries and can no longer adapt their measures to new situations that arise. On the contrary, poor young people, some even having been arbitrarily imprisoned like Joseph, by their wisdom have gained favor with the populace and have been elevated to royalty. But succeeding generations also turn from them and tire of their rule, for popular favor is fickle. Therefore those who trust in their power, in their influence and in their wisdom as they govern are also relying on something vain and are pursuing the wind. These words of Solomon also find their application in modern democracies. There is a continual change of ministries, presidents and other personalities called to govern a nation, all of them only, in turn, to become unpopular and then to be dismissed—a demonstration that power too is vanity and a chasing of the wind.

Under the term *vanity* one can also include sin: an evil action is also like a fleeting breath, but it does not disappear into oblivion. God remembers it, and unless we repent of it and ask for forgiveness in Jesus' name, it brings God's anger and punishment upon us. It is a vanity which does not disappear completely, but which has harmful consequences for us. This is also true of an act of piety which only has the appearance of piety, but which is, at the bottom, sinful and hence calls forth God's anger. It serves a good purpose to mention this because not infrequently men regard a particular act as being pious when in reality it is futile and sinful.

## Chapter V Vanities in Worship and Wealth

**Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.**

The house of God is the temple where one joins others to hear God's Word read and expounded and also to offer sacrifices. These were a prefigurement of the unique sacrifice which Christ, the Son of God, was going to offer for the sins of the world. These sacrifices of ancient Israel were only acceptable to God on the basis of faith in the salvation God announced in his Word. This is why David says: "You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite spirit, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 51:16, 17). The prophets were often obliged to reprimand severely God's people because they offered the sacrifice of fools, which was certainly no expression of a repentant heart. They were rather a cover-up, feigned piety, a false show to hide an impenitent heart and a life dominated by sin. Hear what God has Isaiah say in this regard: "'The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?' says the Lord. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls, and lambs and goats!'" Then he gives the reason why such sacrifices are not pleasing to him: "Wash yourselves clean! Take your evil deeds out of my sight!" (Is 1:11, 16).

In due time God himself abolished the cult of sacrifices, but there are still fools who do not come to God's house to hear, but who imagine that their mere presence there is a good and meritorious act which will procure forgiveness for a life deliberately led in sin. They come not to hear, but to parade their persons in public and to have folks believe that they are pious people. However, blessed are such as hear the Word of God and *keep* it.

Solomon next calls our attention to another type of vanity or feigned piety: the heaping up of useless words in the ears of God:

**Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth; so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words (2, 3).**

We hear the same warning from the lips of Jesus when he says to his disciples, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:7, 8).

The exhortations to prayer are numerous in the Bible. “Pray continually,” the apostle says (1 Th 5:17). But this pious act too can turn into something futile and feigned. Jesus says that this is what occurs in pagan worship. They imagine the answer to a prayer is effected by a torrent of words. Hence the repetitiousness and the speed with which they “pray.” This is an abuse of piety which unfortunately is also present in some prayer meetings, where each can have his turn and where certain people parade their fine facility in praying to be admired by those present. What Solomon condemns is the rapid heaping up of a great number of words, the greater part of which are devoid of meaning, something which is bound to result when one speaks too much and too fast without reflection. Hurling at God such litanies devoid of sense is a despising of his majesty. Solomon reminds us of the fact that God is in heaven and we are on earth. God is our heavenly Father, closer to us than the soul is to the body, and he would have us address our petitions to him as dear children to a dear father. But he is also exalted infinitely above us, and addressing him with superfluous verbiage shows a lack of respect. Solomon employs an analogy for this: as a host of tasks during the day result in a sleep troubled with dreams, so too many words mark the foolish man, who is spewing forth words devoid of sense.

A third sort of futile and feigned piety consists in making vows that are not kept. On this score Solomon says:

**When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger: “My vow was a mistake.” Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands. Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God (4–7).**

There existed in Israel the custom of making a vow, a public promise to offer a sacrifice to God, to give a gift to the temple, or to consecrate some object to God in gratitude either for a prayer that was heard, for deliverance from some danger or affliction, or for some other benefit one experienced. These vows were not at all obligatory, no one was obliged to make a vow. However, once made, a vow had to be kept. A vow promised and not carried out was the equivalent of a lie, futile and vain piety. What Solomon urges here is also found in the law of Moses: “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter, you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth” (Dt 23:21–23).

The first vow recorded in Scripture was the one Jacob made when he went to Mesopotamia (Gn 28:20–22). Here Jacob was not expressing doubt, but he was, in advance, showing his gratitude to God who would protect him and bring him back to his homeland. In 1 Samuel 1:11 Hannah promises to consecrate to the service of God the male child he would be pleased to give her. This was Samuel whom she received in answer to her prayer and she did dedicate him to God’s service in fulfillment of her vow. Jephthah promised to consecrate to God the one who would come out of the door of his house when he would return victoriously from his battle with the Amorites.

This custom of making a special vow to God publicly no longer exists in new Testament times. It fell into disuse with the Law of Moses. But we have the baptismal vow, for in baptism we were consecrated to the triune God and we also promised to serve him and to dedicate to him our lives and possessions. The apostle writes: Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship (Ro 12:1). Consequently our whole life ought to be lived in service to God and in this service not only our body, but also our intelligence and all the faculties of our heart and soul ought to be enlisted. It must be admitted that we are often negligent in carrying out this vow, and that is why Christians should constantly remind themselves of their baptism, and that in it they have consecrated themselves to God, and should ask him to give them the strength to remain faithful to that solemn promise; to forgive the lapses of which they have become guilty; and always to keep them faithful to their baptismal vow. Nor should they forget to thank God for all the spiritual blessings that they have received and continue to receive through Jesus Christ.

### **The Vanity of Earthly Riches**

**If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields (8, 9).**

Here Solomon returns to a theme already mentioned at the beginning of the fourth chapter: the oppression of the poor and feeble who have no defender. In that place he mentioned the reaction of natural man: better not to be born at all than to be born to suffer. Now Solomon advances another point of view: the oppressors generally have superiors who inflict on them the punishment they have merited, and over all of us there is God who in his time exacts vengeance. In any case, it is of advantage to a country if the king himself profits from a field, that is to say, that order and peace prevail in the land. One might object and say that it is precisely often the superiors, the authorities invested with governmental power who oppress their subjects and commit such injustices. However, first of all we must remember that even bad government is better than no government at all, than anarchy, for existence is impossible unless some order is maintained in a land. But over all there is the supreme authority of God. Nor dare one forget that God often imposes a bad, unjust and tyrannical government on a people as a punishment for their sins of avarice, idolatry, immorality, unbelief and other vices. In Isaiah 3:4 God said regarding Israel: "I will make boys their officials, mere children will govern them." Likewise Hosea 13:11: "So in my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath I took him away." Instead of complaining and revolting against a bad government, a people should rather repent of their sins and invoke the mercy and aid of God. This is more effective than revolution which unleashes evil passions and brings suffering to the just and also to the unjust. Thus rebellion against bad government is also vanity; better to seek refuge with the Eternal, the supreme Ruler.

**Whoever loves money, never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner, except to those who consume them? The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep (10–12).**

One must be careful to note that Solomon is speaking of the *love* of money, and not of its *possession*. One can possess money without loving it, just as one can love it without possessing it. The love of money is futile for several reasons. To begin with, he who loves money is never satisfied; he never has enough, he always desires more. He who loves money and riches is like the alcoholic who is always thirsty and the more he drinks, the more does his thirst increase. There is another kind of vanity in this regard: when wealth increases, those who consume it increase. The owner of a fine estate, for example, has need of a numerous body of workers to maintain it, and thus his riches are absorbed by others and he can only feast his eyes on its beauty. Yet this is



not the happiness which a person who loves money desires. Here Solomon is not speaking of children of God to whom God has granted riches and who employ it to serve God and their neighbor and whose happiness is described in the Scriptures in this way: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Ac 20:35).

The worker who is content with his daily bread and a simple meal enjoys sweet sleep, while the sleep of the rich man is disturbed by cares for his wealth and by digestive problems caused by too rich a meal.

**I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger (13–16).**

It is evident that here too Solomon is speaking of the children of this world, who love money and who seek their happiness in earthly riches. For them it is a grievous evil to lose through some misfortune what they have accumulated during their lives at the expense of cares and annoyances; of not being able at their death to take their wealth with them, and not even being able to leave it to their children. On the other hand, the apostle says concerning God’s children: “But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing we will be content with that” (1 Tm 6:6–8). They say with Job of old: “Naked came I from my mother’s womb and naked will I depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.”

**Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and to be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart (18–20).**

At the end of this chapter Solomon repeats once more one of the essential truths which he teaches in this book: what the attitude of a child of God should be over against the possessions and joys of this world. That attitude is to stand on the middle ground between pessimism and asceticism, on the one hand, which despise God’s gifts, and Epicureanism, on the other hand, which seeks its happiness in the enjoyment of this world’s goods. The child of God accepts with gratitude and enjoys with a thankful heart the possessions God bestows on him. If God accords him wealth, he regards it and the ability of enjoying it as the gift of a gracious God, and God responds by filling the believer’s heart with joy and lets him forget the misfortunes of this life.

## **Chapter VI**

### **The Vanity of Possessing Things Which One Cannot Enjoy and of Desiring Things One Cannot Obtain**

At the end of the last chapter Solomon made the observation that not only are the things which we enjoy during this earthly life a gift of God for which we should be thankful, but our Creator in his goodness also enables us to enjoy them. In this sixth chapter Solomon continues to expound this same theme from the negative point of view. He makes a clear distinction between the *possession* of things and our *enjoyment* of them. After all, one can possess things, even great riches, and not enjoy them.

**I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men. God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil (6:1, 2).**

Solomon is here speaking of wicked men who possess riches, but do not enjoy them. Basically, what is meant by enjoying the things and riches God has given us? In the first place it means being grateful for these gifts of the Creator. It means ascribing to them their true value as being very precious things and using them with a thankful heart according to God's will—not only to satisfy our own needs, but for God's glory and for our neighbor's benefit. Wicked men do not act in this way. There are misers who spend their whole lives accumulating gold, silver and other riches, but to no good purpose. Instead, what they accumulate become objects of idolatry. They do not use their possessions in keeping with God's will because they do not look upon them as gifts of God, but rather as goods acquired by their own industry and acumen. God can punish such men by depriving them of the faculty of enjoying their wealth, either by submerging them in the torments and cares attendant on the accumulation and preservation of their riches, or by taking away from them what they regard as theirs, and giving it to another to enjoy.

Solomon is actually expressing the same truth Paul calls attention to in his letter to Timothy: "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tm 6:6). The man who spends his life in the possession, contemplation and accumulation of riches has lived in vain, even if he has numerous children and were to live a thousand years twice over (3–6) i.e., twice as long as the patriarchs before the Flood. He is more unfortunate than the stillborn child, who has never seen the light of the sun, being brought forth and disappearing in darkness (3). What futility and what a misfortune! A long, long life spent without enjoying the blessings and mercies of God! What lost opportunities which can never be recaptured and which only lead to eternal torments! And that man's riches will turn into dust in the general destruction for which all earthly things are destined.

Solomon describes another vanity of human life:

**All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetites are never satisfied (7).**

Whatever a man's occupation, his trade, his possessions may be, all goes basically to feed and clothe him, and yet even in this regard his satisfaction is never complete. There is always a need for more food and for a replacement of his clothing. After he has eaten, hunger will surely return in due time, even as, in the course of time, old and worn clothing must be replaced. Besides, there is the host of the wicked and of unbelievers who are unacquainted with the contentment faith in Christ offers and who have no hope for everlasting life. Such men are constantly agitated by desires which they cannot satisfy, desires for riches, pleasures, power, honor which they either cannot satisfy, or of which they never have enough. On the other hand, there are the true Christians and children of God who confess: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." But are they perfectly happy with their lot? Don't they, too, have a sinful flesh which incites desire for things they cannot have, which God will not grant them, but which they would nonetheless like and wish for? Solomon is certainly right in asking:

**What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? (8).**

Even pious children of God, wise and humble, who live according to his will do not have this advantage that all their desires are satisfied. They too must confess that in the recesses of their hearts there are desires which remain unsatisfied, that, as they see it, there is this thing or that thing which, were it not denied them, would make them happier. That is why Solomon formulates the following rule for true happiness:

**Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (9).**

In other words, to be happy, one must be satisfied with what one has, what one can see with one's eyes and touch with one's hands. One must not fret and be disturbed by a desire for things beyond one's reach, things

which God does not see fit to grant us. That would be a chasing after the wind which will always elude our grasp, a meaningless and vain pursuit.

The futility of unattainable desires is underscored by a profound truth which Solomon now reveals:

**Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known: no man can contend with one who is stronger than he (10).**

Whoever exists has already been named even before his existence in this world. By whom? Evidently by God who has foreseen all things from eternity, who has called them into being according to his eternal decree: “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11). It is the Lord who does these things that have been known for ages (Ac 15:17). Since the Lord does all things as he has decreed them from eternity, how vain and foolish it is to contend with Almighty God! What folly to complain and reproach him when he denies this or that desire which we may cherish in our hearts, but which is not in conformity with his will.

**The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? (11).**

Obviously here it is a matter of the countless words which a man utters when he contends with the Lord, either reproaching him for something that man did not wish for, or for not granting what he did wish for. Such words are absolutely vain, to no purpose. For one thing, one sets oneself against God almighty and such talk accomplishes nothing. Worse still, such conduct may well irritate God and call forth his anger. We have in the Scriptures the case of Job who contended with God and to whom God said: “Who is this who darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?” Finally Job must confess: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 38:2; 42:3–6).

It is for this reason that Solomon concludes by calling attention to a similar truth:

**For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? (12).**

These words cause us to see in an admirable way the folly and stupidity of a man who would set up his own desires in opposition to the works of the almighty and omniscient God because these works do not please him and are not in conformity with his desires. What is man over against the eternal and almighty God? A shadow which flits across the face of the earth only to disappear. Does he know what is of benefit for him during his short life? He indeed supposes so, but his heart is full of shadowy error. To cite only one egregious example: How many people do not desire to become rich in the belief that riches will make them happy? But they are only deceiving themselves and demonstrating their folly for “people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Tm 6:9). God alone knows what is good for a man and it is he alone who must instill in us confidence concerning the present and the future. When Solomon says: “Who can tell a man what will happen under the sun when he is gone,” he is not thinking of what will happen after death, but rather after this present moment. God alone knows the future because it is he who foresees and directs it according to his eternal and immutable decree; another compelling reason for not insisting on the satisfaction of our desires concerning the future, but rather for praying at all times: ‘Thy will be done!’

## Chapter VII Wisdom Which Preserves Life

We admire the depth of Solomon's thought and the marvelous balance in his thinking. On the one hand, he says that all is vanity; on the other hand, he demonstrates how God, using such vanity, carries out his work in terms of his immutable will. True wisdom, therefore, consists in being able to distinguish carefully between vanity which perishes and God's work which endures; in not putting one's trust in what is futile, but in seeking refuge in the immutable will of God. Solomon points us to true wisdom by means of several examples:

### **A good name is better than fine perfume (1a).**

The Israelites made much use of perfume. On a festive occasion it was customary to put perfume on the guests (Lk 7:36–50). A good perfume pleases man's sense of smell and a person wearing it is a welcome addition in a group. Nevertheless a fine exterior may conceal an unpleasant character that will prove to be a disruptive element in a group. For this reason a good reputation is worth more than a pleasant exterior, for a good name is the result of a useful life of service to one's fellowman. It contributes considerably to the happiness a man enjoys on this earth. It survives death, and if this good name is also of worth in the eyes of God because it is the result of faith in the blood of Christ which washes away all sin and also of good works which are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, then it is a good of inestimable worth that remains through all eternity. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (Re 14:13).

Distinguishing once more between temporal, perishable goods and eternal, lasting ones, Solomon continues:

### **And the day of death, better than the day of birth (1b).**

Surely the day on which an infant is born is an occasion of great joy. Solomon himself says so in Psalm 127: "Sons are a heritage of the Lord, children a reward from Him." Likewise the loss of a dear one is an occasion of mourning. Thus Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father (Gn 50:10). Nevertheless is it an evidence of profound insight to say that the day of death is better than the day of birth. As a result of his birth, to be sure, man enters this earthly life, but it is a life contaminated by sin in which he must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of heaven. Death, on the other hand, for the child of God is a day of deliverance from all evil and an entering into celestial bliss concerning which he can say with the apostle: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.... I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far" (Php 1:21, 23).

The wisdom of Solomon carries this thought even farther and says:

### **It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man, the living should take this to heart (2).**

Here Solomon expresses himself precisely and in a nicely balanced way. He by no means forbids our entering a house when a celebration is going on or our enjoying good gifts of God in the company of others. Recall what was said in verse 18 of chapter 5: "Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him." The apostle Paul also bids us: "Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (Ro 12:15). However, Solomon is also aware of the perversion of man's heart which is only too inclined to overindulge and to mistake the pleasures and enjoyment of this present world for genuine happiness. This is why it is better for a man to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for the death of his neighbor will remind a man of

his own death and may move him to prepare for the moment when God will call him from this earth to appear in his presence: “Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12).

Solomon goes a step farther in stating a truth which is linked closely to the preceding:

**Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart (3).**

A French interpretive translation (*la version synodale*) reads: “One can have a sad countenance, yet joy in one’s heart.” Only a Christian can comprehend and agree with this statement of Solomon. A worldly individual hates sadness and desires nothing but laughter and amusement. He wants to dispel every reminder of death because the very thought of it saddens and frightens him. But the Christian knows that even as the thought of death can be useful and salutary so too “godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor 7:10). The Christian experiences sadness when he thinks of his sinful condition and of his lack of fervor and love in the service of Christ and his church. But such sadness is useful and necessary if his heart is to find joy in Christ who has redeemed him with his blood and made him an heir of celestial glory. Solomon does not frown on laughter. Does he not say: “There is a time to weep and a time to laugh”? But sadness is better than laughter because of its useful spiritual effect.

This is why Solomon continues in the same vein:

**The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure (4).**

The sage has in his heart the sentiments and thoughts of those in mourning because he is put into a serious mood by his consciousness of sin and death. He is seeking a refuge with his Savior and rejoicing in his salvation while the fool wards off any thought of repentance and seeks only to amuse himself with the empty and futile things of this world.

It necessarily follows that the fool does not like to be reprimanded, for any reprimand is a check on his amusements. Hence Solomon’s next remark is very much to the point:

**It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless (5, 6).**

The reprimand of a wise man is of profit for it tends to uncover and correct faults, while the laughter of fools does the opposite and is like the crackling of thorns under the pot, futile and ineffective, a lot of noise to no real effect.

The reprimand of a sage is useful to the one who himself has the wisdom to accept it. However, the wise man, too, is exposed to dangers.

**Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart (7).**

A wise judge can lose his wisdom and act like a fool, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty because he lets himself be intimidated by a powerful person or permits himself to be bribed.

Another wise rule useful in life is this:

**The end of a matter is better than the beginning (8a).**

A task terminated and finished is better than one started and left incomplete and hence useless. The following truth is closely related to the preceding one:

### **Patience is better than pride (8b).**

There are, to be sure, proud spirits who believe themselves capable of accomplishing great things and whose brain is feverish with grandiose projects, but who lack the patience to see them through to completion. They start many projects, but when their work does not progress with the desired ease and speed, they quickly tire and their work remains unfinished. By contrast, God usually begins his works in a small way and has them develop slowly midst many difficulties, so that man may learn the patience and perseverance which the Scriptures ascribe to God in the achieving of his works. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field... the smallest of all your seeds” (Mt 13:31, 32). Jesus began his kingdom by sending twelve Galilean fishermen out into the world.

Following the same train of thought Solomon says:

### **Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools (9).**

A haughty spirit which is in great haste to accomplish great things becomes irritated when these things do not come off with the desired speed. Such irritation and impatience mark the fool, for it is God who gives the outcome he wishes to every matter, and man can accomplish neither more nor less than God will allow. We ought therefore let God direct our affairs, placing in him our entire confidence and wishing patiently for him to crown our efforts with whatever success he is pleased to grant.

Such irritation often expresses itself in the complaint:

### **Why were the old days better than these? (10a).**

Solomon’s answer to this question is:

### **It is not wise to ask such questions (10b).**

We are well acquainted with the complaints of people who are discontented with the present and who regret the passing “of the good old days.” But such complaints do not have their source in wisdom for in the first place in looking back we tend to see things rosier than they really were, and as far as the present is concerned we are too conscious of the darker aspects. The apostle teaches us a better way to appreciate the present, no matter what its nature: “But we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Ro 5:3).

Having set down a series of rules which may serve as guides to true wisdom, Solomon resumes his praise of wisdom because it alone sustains man’s life and promotes his true happiness:

### **Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor (11, 12).**

Wisdom consists in knowing the will of God and in the aptitude of living in conformity with that will. God has revealed his will in the Law of which we have a summary in the Decalogue. Concerning that Law we read: “This do and thou shalt live.” Even outward conformity to this Law bears fruit for this earthly life. But fallen man is incapable of loving God with all his heart and therefore merits temporal and eternal death since God’s Law is to be kept perfectly. Fallen man lacks wisdom and has become foolish. However, God has not abandoned him, but has revealed a way of salvation in his Son Jesus Christ “who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Through faith in Christ we therefore have true wisdom which promotes life, even here on earth, although in an imperfect manner, but in eternity, in a manner which can only be described as the perfection of celestial glory.

Finally Solomon sums up true wisdom as follows:

**Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy: but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore a man cannot discover anything about his future (13, 14).**

In all cases and at all times we should bear in mind the activity of God “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11). He directs good and evil according to his immutable will, but always in a way salutary to his children. Nobody can straighten what he has made crooked. If therefore he leads us along a road that we consider crooked, let us follow him without resistance or murmuring, having confidence that it is nevertheless a path that will lead to a proper goal, and being sure that any effort to take another road would lead us astray. So too, good and bad days come from God. Hence, on a happy day, we should be happy and grateful to God, and concerning the bad day we should believe that it is good for us and that God means it for our good, even if it brings us suffering. We have already cited Paul in this regard. We add to his words those of James: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (1:2, 3). Such perseverance or patience is a precious thing in God’s sight, although difficult for man to practice. It is for this reason that one must ask God for it in prayer as James says: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously” (1:5).

Indeed, our life is a succession of good and bad days because it is not God’s intention that we should know what will come in the future, the future that he has determined for us. It is rather his wish that we should place our entire confidence in him, especially in evil days, and that we should be convinced that what seems bad to us, God himself will change into a benefit. This is the kind of wisdom we should ask of him.

### **The Folly One Must Avoid**

It is obvious that in exercising wisdom it is necessary to avoid the other side of the coin: folly. What is true wisdom? Solomon says: “Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13). Furthermore, the Scriptures remind us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). Since the Fall man is without that wisdom; his will is set against God’s will, and as a consequence he is foolish. Children of God therefore humble themselves before God, acknowledging their foolishness and praying that God would heal them of it, and lead them on the path of wisdom.

Life is full of occasions where there is danger of our falling into folly and where it is necessary for us to call upon God to keep our feet from slipping. One such occasion Solomon describes as follows:

**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 (7:15).**

This is a frequent occurrence in human experience. Many pious people perish in spite of, or even because of, their piety, simply because they refuse to commit an act of injustice. We need only think of the many martyrs throughout the ages, both in times past and even in our day. They had to endure torture or an atrocious death because they would not deny their faith. On the other hand, there are wicked, impious people who live out their lives in comfort and ease while joining a godless world in acts of injustice. When this occurs, even faithful children of God are vexed as they behold the wicked enjoying prosperity and a long life, while they, walking in God’s ways, must suffer affliction, or even a violent death at the hands of the wicked. Hear Asaph’s complaint in Psalm 73: “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” [I was about to accuse God of injustice.] “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are

not plagued by human ills.” [Whereas I] “All day long have been plagued; I have been punished every morning” (Ps 73:2–5, 14).

Human reason imagines that God should accord his faithful children a long life of ease on this earth, and should show his displeasure over against the wicked by heaping all sorts of misfortune on them and cutting off their life here prematurely. That was the opinion of Job’s friends. Since God was inflicting those terrible disasters on Job, they concluded that Job must have committed some frightful sin which provoked God’s wrath to such a terrible extent. Now Job knew that this was not so; nevertheless, even he allowed himself to be swept along and ended up in questioning the justice of God. Surely, doubting God’s justice is foolish as Asaph admits in Psalm 73:22: “I was senseless and ignorant,” and as Job also finally confesses: “Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (42:3). Indeed, it is folly, when man, so lacking in justice, presumes to prescribe to God how the latter shall administer justice. It is folly to believe that God is unjust in subjecting his faithful children to all sorts of trials, while according the wicked a long life of ease. It is also foolish to conclude that a man weighed down with sorrows is wicked, and that the one who enjoys prosperity is pious and is receiving the reward of his piety.

There is another folly against which Solomon would have us be on our guard:

### **Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? (16).**

Can one actually be too righteous and too wise? This would not be possible, even if man were still in possession of that righteousness and wisdom with which God created him in the beginning. But as Solomon says in this chapter: “There is not a righteous man on earth who (without fail) does what is right and never sins” (20). Hence, there is not a single human being who is perfectly just and wise. All, even the best of men, are obliged to admit that they still commit sinful and foolish acts. It is a result of such imperfection that there are many who regard themselves as more just and wise than they are in reality and are proud of such imagined perfection; they end up deeming themselves superior to others. Against this particular folly the apostle warns in Romans 12:3, 16: “I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” He further spells out such an attitude very bluntly: “Do not be conceited.” This folly which consists in having too high an opinion of one’s own righteousness, and hence, of being proud, is generally accompanied by another folly which causes us to downplay the righteousness of others, and to condemn their behavior too rigorously and severely. A man who does not see his own faults is a fool incapable of correcting his fellow man’s faults. Jesus warns against such folly when he says: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.... Why do you look at the speck of dust in your brother’s eye?... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:1–5). Yes, those who have too high an opinion of themselves and are proud of their own righteousness are indeed blind and are incapable of judging and correcting the faults of others.

### **Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time? (17).**

What is the meaning of this exhortation? Does Solomon mean to say that one can permit oneself a little wickedness provided that one does not overdo it, just a little, but not too much? We understand this exhortation in the light of what follows: “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” Even the best Christian never attains a perfectly righteous state, free from all sin. But there are those who abuse this truth. They use it to be less zealous in the pursuit of what is good and in the avoidance of evil. They tell themselves: “Since all men are sinners and even the best Christians never succeed in ridding themselves of all sin, what sense is there in taking the trouble to do good and to avoid evil? From time to time we can follow the evil desire of our flesh; afterwards we shall repent and God will forgive us.” Such an attitude leads to the loss of one’s salvation, for man then slips back into the servitude of sin, and God can cut off such a life before there is time to repent. The apostle warns against this type of folly in Romans 6:15, 16: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to



someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

Solomon concludes this line of thought by saying:

**It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes (18).**

One must be on one's guard against both extremes: on the one hand against a confidence in one's own righteousness which is tantamount to inflating it to one's own hurt; on the other hand, one must also be on one's guard against easing up where sanctification is concerned. Excesses in either direction lead to a loss of God's grace and one's salvation. It is the fear of God which helps avoid either excess. He who fears God humbles himself before him as he confesses his sins, and asks the aid of God's Holy Spirit so that he may avoid sin and lead a holy life.

Solomon continues:

**Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins (18, 20).**

The wise man possesses a power greater than any other mere human power, even greater than the power of nuclear weapons, for he places his confidence in God who delivers from sin and every evil: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord.... But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him” (Jn 17:5, 7).

**Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others (21, 22).**

Since all men are sinners there are many evil words which cross their lips, particularly, evil words directed toward their neighbors. It is therefore foolish to wish to hear everything that is said. There are indeed people who have a certain unhealthy curiosity to know all that is said, particularly, the good that is said about them, what is said when they are being praised or flattered. Of course, the opposite may occur too. A master may hear his servant speaking ill of him. Let such folks not then become angry, for they will have to admit that they too have often spoken ill of their neighbor. The wise man will keep his ears and mouth shut so as not to hear or to speak evil and thus he will best avoid quarrels.

**All this I tested by wisdom and said: “I am determined to be wise, but this was beyond me. What is, is distant and profound, who can discover it” (23, 24-literal translation).**

Solomon concludes with a remarkable confession: all these truths which he has just uttered he has recognized, tested and understood by means of wisdom, yet he is also compelled to acknowledge that the degree in which his wisdom increases is accompanied in like degree by an increase in things that are inaccessible to his wisdom. Thus he finds himself farther and farther removed from perfect wisdom. This has indeed been the wisdom of the wise men of every age. How much of the present-day knowledge of the universe, the knowledge which now is, is really superior to the knowledge of antiquity, especially if we consider the deleterious fall-out of such knowledge. Has not the realization of what we do not know increased in like measure? More than ever the real essence of things is and remains unknown, for it is the work of God concerning which the apostle says: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Ro 11:33, 34, 36).

## Inquiry into the Difference Between Wisdom and Folly

**So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly (25).**

Solomon continues his investigation of wisdom. Indeed, true wisdom is acquaintance with God's will and obedience to that will. An acquaintance with wisdom, however, also includes its converse: recognizing sin, disobedience to God's will. The latter is folly, stupidity and can only harm man and be his ruin. An extremely important example in human life in connection with which particular zeal is called for in observing the wisdom commanded by God and in avoiding the folly in turning from the way of those commandments is the reciprocal relationship between husband and wife. In the beginning God said: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gn 2:18). Woman was therefore created to be man's helper. Solomon sings the praise of such a wife who conducts herself in keeping with this, the will of God, her Creator: "A prudent wife is from the Lord" (i.e., a gift of God) (Pr 19:14). "He who finds a wife, finds what is good, and receives favor from God" (Pr 18:22). The last chapter of Proverbs is an admirable encomium on a virtuous wife and opens with these words: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies." Solomon also depicts the happiness which permeates such a marriage: "Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life God has given you under the sun" (9:9). In his "Song of Songs" Solomon represents the love that exists between Christ and his church by using the imagery of the love between a betrothed couple. In the Old as well as in the New Testament marriage serves to symbolize the union existing between Christ and his church. God has assigned to each partner his place in the marriage and his conduct with respect to the other. To the husband he says: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church." And to wives: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph 5:25, 22).

Unfortunately since the Fall the divine institution of marriage as also the relationship between men and women has been vitiated and corrupted lamentably. In this regard the realities of life also confirm the truth of the statement Solomon made in verse 20 of chapter 7: "There is no righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." Also at the close of that chapter he declares: "This only have I found: God made man upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." God created man with the ability to act with rectitude according to God's will, but man turned aside from God's commandments to follow his own mind and to go ways at variance with God's ways. Since the Fall men no longer love their wives as they should, nor do they conduct themselves as the family head in the sense intended by the Creator and wives no longer submit to the family head and are his helper in the original sense intended by the Creator.

Solomon mentions an example of this unfortunate perversion:

**I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare (26).**

This describes the adulterous woman whose caresses have the aim of getting a man to commit adultery. Solomon has a word of warning for the young man against such an adulterous woman. She says: "Come, let us drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love. My husband is not at home, he has gone on a long journey" (Pr 7:18, 19). Such a woman is not a man's helper but his downfall. "Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death" (Pr 7:27). The man who permits himself to be seduced is not a head or leader who can direct others in the way of God's commandments, but a man enslaved by sin and by those who pander to sin.

We have a concrete example in the account of Samson and Delilah. Samson was a leader in Israel, but made himself unworthy of this office by marrying a Philistine woman. By cajolery she wrested out of him the true secret of his strength and then delivered him into the hands of the Philistines. And what can we say about Solomon himself in this regard? In the First Book of Kings we read: "King Solomon, however, loved many

foreign women” about whom the Lord had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” ... “So Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely as David his father had done. On a hill east of Jerusalem Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Moloch the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods” (1 Kgs 11).

Solomon continues:

**“Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all” (27, 28).**

Solomon tries to find a reason for this strange behavior of so many men who permit themselves to be seduced to sin by a woman. He does not find a reason, for sin is always folly, contrary to sound reason as God created it. What he finds is that among a thousand persons there is only one man and no woman who is upright. What do these words mean? Certain commentators believe that Solomon wishes to state that a man can better resist temptation than a woman. But this does not seem to us to be a satisfactory explanation. When the Apostle Peter calls woman “the weaker partner” (1 Pe 3:7) he is speaking of physical weakness and not of the moral weakness which contaminates all humanity. Here there is no difference between man and woman.

It seems to us that Solomon is rather thinking of the authority that God gave man regarding woman. The husband is the head of the wife and not the other way around. We have already cited the words of the apostle found in Ephesians 5:23: “The husband is the head of the wife.” This position of authority has its basis in the order of things God established at Creation before the Fall. The same apostle says: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Tm 2:12, 13). There he sets down the reason: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” Furthermore in First Corinthians: “The head of the woman is man ... for man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (11:3, 8, 9).

Adam, in taking from the hand of Eve the forbidden fruit to eat of it, not only disobeyed the commandment of God, he also acted in violation of his status of being woman’s head, a status God had assigned to him. Eve not only failed to act as man’s helper, but she was also not being submissive to her husband and was seducing him to transgress God’s command. This reversal of roles has, since the Fall, permeated all humanity. Men are no longer capable of exercising their role as the wife’s head in conformity to the will of God, and women are not willing to submit to man’s headship, but presume to arrogate this role to themselves. This is why Solomon says that among a thousand men he has found only one single man capable of exercising his role of headship, but among these persons not a single woman; it is because God has not assigned to woman the role of exercising authority over man. All affirmations to the contrary, affirmations concerning the equality of the sexes, are only proof of human decadence which has subverted God’s order of creation. It is for this reason that Solomon here sets down the definitive result of all his investigations:

**This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes (29).**

Here then is the solution to all the enigmas which confront us in the conduct of human beings, whether male or female. God created man and woman with a righteous or honest will, conformable to his own. Since the Fall of man, however, men and women have turned away from the will of God to follow their own perverted wills. They seek to twist God’s will also regarding the special roles assigned to each of the sexes. There are men who conduct themselves like women, and women who conduct themselves like men. Man now is incapable of being the true head who carries out God’s will in the domain God assigned to him within the household. It is only by turning to Christ, the Savior, that men and women will succeed in partially conquering the evil desires of the flesh and in conducting themselves as men and women in keeping with God’s will.

## Chapter VIII

### The Wise Man's Attitude Over Against God's Unfathomable Rule

#### **Who is like the wise man? who knows the explanation of things? (8:1a).**

This universe is the work of the infinite wisdom of God. Everything is in its place, and everything has its specific purpose. Besides, this wisdom consists in knowing the function everything has within the assemblage of the universe. Such wisdom comes from God and is given to man up to a certain degree, more to one man and less to another. It has its limits and it recognizes the superiority of God's wisdom in those things which it fails to comprehend.

#### **Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance (1b).**

Because the wise man is aware of the wisdom of God on every hand, his heart is filled with contentment and joy, a contentment and joy which are reflected in the serenity of his face. By contrast, the senseless man who is not aware of God's works is discontented. Wherever he looks he sees something that irritates him. The result is that he is displeased and the severity or hardness of his face reflects the discontentment and bad humor of his heart.

Solomon continues in contrasting the comportment of the wise man with that of his superior:

**Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" (2-4).**

Many commentators think that an earthly king and human government are being referred to here. This interpretation is possible. The wise man obeys the king, no matter what his rule, because he has promised obedience by an oath to God, and he will not turn against his government in disobedience and revolt when the king or government acts in a way, or calls for an action, that displeases him. After all, the government has received from God the authority to do that which seems good, provided such orders are not contrary to the Law of God. The wise man submits to these orders while the senseless or foolish man always finds fault with them, criticizes them, is opposed to them, resists them and even rebels against the legitimate government.

It seems, however, that these words are better suited to describe the wise man's comportment over against God and his Son, who is the King of kings and who exercises almighty power over this earth. The wise man keeps his commandments because they assure life. God, above all, can do whatever he pleases and what he does is always just and good. No one has a right to ask him what he is doing. No man has a right to call him to account for his actions, and even less so, to criticize him or to resist or disobey him.

**Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him. Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no man is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it (5-8).**

This is the wisdom which God himself teaches man: God promises that he will show love to thousands who love him and keep his commandments (Ex 20:6). To him who trusts in the Lord there is the assurance: "Then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent" (Ps 91:10). The wise man knows that God has set a time when his judgment will strike the wicked, for wickedness brings upon man misfortune, even perdition, but man never knows at what moment God's judgment [The French translation has "judgment" where the NIV has "procedure" in this section] will strike. The day of his death is unknown to him, and when that

moment comes, there is no escaping it—even as a soldier does not receive leave to go home in the midst of battle.

**All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless (9, 10).**

In examining the fate of different men and particularly in comparing the fate of those who obey God's commandments with that of the wicked who live in sin, Solomon has noticed that appearances often seem contrary to what he has just said, to wit, that those who keep the commandments are not struck by misfortune, while the wicked are unfailingly struck by God's judgment. He has noticed, e.g., that a pious man is often oppressed by a wicked man. He already mentioned this in chapter 7, verse 15: "I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and a wicked man living long in his wickedness." Besides, there are wicked men who have a peaceful death and receive a pompous burial, while there are righteous people who are exiled, obliged to leave their country, where there is a holy place, a temple, and are forced to live in a strange land and are totally forgotten in their native land where they once lived. This too is meaningless, a grave fault which causes malfunctioning in society.

There is another vanity, a meaningless, confusing state of affairs, mentioned by Solomon:

**When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong (11).**

Here we are confronted with another phenomenon which human reason cannot comprehend and which is out of harmony with God's justice and a just administration of human government. God does not strike the wicked man immediately because of his sin. The wicked often live a long time without being punished, even spending their whole life without having God's judgment visited upon them. Then this results in their hearts being filled with a desire to do evil, for they imagine that there is no punishment for their sin. Such a man says in his heart: "God has forgotten: he covers his face and never sees" (Ps 10:11). In this way God brings to the surface what is really in a man's heart. He makes evident the difference between those who fear him and serve him with all their heart and others who offer a hypocritical service and obedience. The latter serve him only because and to the degree that they fear punishment, but in reality they believe that there is no reason for fear and they make sport of God and give free course to their wicked will.

Solomon expresses a similar reflection in verse 14:

**There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless (12).**

This is a meaningless thing, and seems to us even stranger and more unjust than the preceding. Not only do the wicked live a long time with impunity, but God seems to be ruling things in contradiction to his justice. Those who live in keeping with justice according to his commandments seem weighed down with misfortune and punishment, while the wicked who flout his commandments live in happiness and have good things in abundance. The children of God often lament this; so Asaph in Psalm 73: "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... They are free from the burdens common to man.... They are not plagued by human ills.... Surely in vain have I kept my heart clean, in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued. I have been punished every morning."

It is especially in this connection that true wisdom gives evidence of a proper attitude over against the incomprehensibility of God's rule. Solomon formulates this as follows:

**Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow (13, 14).**

The wise man does not permit himself to become unsettled or to be misguided by his lack of understanding for God's rule. True wisdom is always linked up with the fear of God. At the conclusion of Ecclesiastes we read: "Fear God and keep his commandments" and at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." To fear God is to be cognizant of his divine majesty, of his wisdom, of his infinite power, of his love for men, of his grace and mercy toward the unfortunate and toward the repentant sinner, of his justice and holiness which eliminate sin either by converting the sinner or by condemning the one who refuses to humble himself in his presence. Thus the happiness of the wicked man is but an ephemeral shadow lengthening into eternal torment, while the apparent misfortune of the just man is also only a shadow, but one that gives way to a happiness that is infinite and eternal. All the works of God are marvelous, surpassing all human intelligence. The wise man humbles himself before God and adores his infinite majesty.

Finally Solomon reverts once more to practical advice for this earthly life, advice he has given on several previous occasions (2:24; 3:10; 5:17):

**So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun (15).**

The works of God are incomprehensible and unfathomable in their profundity. It is therefore not only useless but even presumptuous to waste one's time and energy in wracking one's brain in an effort to understand this incomprehensibility. Solomon is not speaking here of spiritual blessings, but of blessings God grants man "under the sun," during and within the framework of this earthly life. He gives us food and drink and all that is necessary to maintain this earthly life. We should be happy to have these things and be grateful for them. There are brief periods of rest and joy which God, in his goodness, accords us in this present life where sin and death reign, but where God crowns things by according us salvation in Christ Jesus. Thus the hope of eternal life casts a resplendent light on this earthly life where the blessings of eternal life in the form of hope are added for good measure if we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

### **The Unfathomableness of God's Works**

**When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it (16, 17).**

Since God works out all things according to the purpose of his will (Eph 1:11), wisdom must be of such a sort as to comprehend the reason and aim of God in acting in any particular case. It was in search of such wisdom and knowledge that Solomon examined all things occurring on the earth. He reflected on these things day and night, but without success. The works of God remain for him incomprehensible enigmas—unfathomable. He is obliged to exclaim with the wise man of the New Testament: "Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? (Ro 11:33, 34).

## Chapter IX

**So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him (9:1).**

Once more Solomon mentions the basic truth that he has already stated and which serves as a premise for all that follows: all the actions of man are in the hands of God. Man is not free to do as he wishes. This is something which Saint Paul also says: "For from him and to him and through him are all things," (Ro 11:36). Also in Acts: "For in him we live and move and have our being." (17:18).

And since all the actions of men and all the events of their lives are under God's control, no man knows what awaits him. God alone knows. Men do not know whether something disagreeable or something pleasant awaits them in the very next moment. Everything is effected by God at the very moment he decides on, and man knows absolutely nothing about the very next moment. It is not God's will that man should know what will happen in the future. It is rather his will that men place their confidence in him and submit to his will no matter what that may be.

**All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live (2, 3a).**

Here Solomon touches on one aspect of the unfathomableness of God's will which seems frightfully scandalous to human reason. Solomon already spoke of this in chapter 7, verse 15: "A righteous man perishes in his righteousness and a wicked man lives long in his wickedness." Here Solomon unreservedly affirms that the good and the wicked have one and the same lot. There are good and pious men who are struck with misfortune as though they were wicked men, and there are wicked men who enjoy prosperity as though they were dear children of God. Considering this, it is evident, as Solomon says, that the hearts of men are full of evil and that there is madness in their hearts while they live. See how they reason: If the good man is struck with misfortune as though he were wicked, and if the wicked man is accorded an abundance of good things as though he were the beloved of God, what then is the purpose of aspiring to godliness and of avoiding sin? They are tempted to reason like Asaph: "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... All day long have I been plagued: I have been punished every morning" (Ps 73:2, 3, 14).

The following words of Solomon seem even stranger to a child of God:

**Afterward they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have part in anything that happens under the sun (3b–6).**

Solomon has now arrived at a point which is most scandalous and shocking to human reason, namely, that our whole life is vanity, and it is this that establishes absolute equality among all men: rich and poor, weak and strong, good and evil. This makes all equal; this death does! As long as man lives on this earth he has hope that his lot might possibly improve, but once he is dead, it is all over. He is cut off from this life. He can no longer take part in what occurs under the sun. He is not aware of what is going on on the earth. Superficial readers suppose that the author of this book was an unbeliever who held that death meant the annihilation of man and that there was nothing beyond death. But to hold this view is to misunderstand Solomon badly. Solomon is fully aware that there is a life after death. In the eleventh chapter we read: "Be happy, young man,

while you are young ... but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment” (9). Solomon wishes to alert us to the fact that the life beyond death in eternity in the presence of God will be entirely different from this temporal and terrestrial life. We shall no longer know what is occurring on the earth. Isaiah confirms this: “But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, or Israel acknowledge us, you, O Lord, are our Father” (63:16). We shall no longer have a recollection of the sins we committed, nor of the troubles we endured since nothing will disturb our joy and happiness.

It is for this reason that Solomon here in the ninth chapter sets down this exhortation regarding this present life:

**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom (10).**

Every man has received from God a task to accomplish and also the necessary strength to carry out his obligation. In this activity he utilizes all his powers and his wisdom during this life on earth, for after death he can no longer continue such earthly activity. Above all, he cannot make up for time lost or fill in any gaps that might exist in his work.

Solomon wishes to teach us the proper attitude toward this life and the life beyond the grave, the correct use of temporal and eternal life. One must not imagine that our stay on this earth is a permanent one. One should rather prepare for an abiding stay in the presence of God. On the other hand, we are not to neglect what God has planned in our particular case for this life, be it our work or our pleasures, or even our sufferings. All have their place in God’s design.

**Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun. For this is your lot in life and your toilsome labor under the sun (7–9).**

Because of death, our life is meaningless, fleeting, vanity, a puff of breath passing quickly and gone: “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more” (Ps 103:15). “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (Jas 4:14). Because this life is shadowy and fleeting Solomon exhorts us to rejoice in the blessings God grants in this short life. We are to enjoy the daily food God provides and be grateful to him for it. Wine too is a gift of God which we should drink with joy and not with sorrow according to the words in Psalm 104:15: “Wine that gladdens the heart of man.” White clothing is an indication of joy, as are also the fragrances men use (Ps 23:5). Finally Solomon mentions marriage as a supreme blessing of God for this earthly life.

**Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love (9a).**

This is the greatest happiness a man can have under the sun apart from the spiritual happiness beyond the sun. God created both man and woman and also established the institution of marriage. He said: “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Conjugal love is in itself happiness; to love and to be loved makes one happy. Mutual aid, which marital partners accord each other, contributes to that happiness. Solomon said previously: “Two are better than one because they have a good return from their work” (4:9). Each one derives a benefit from his own work and also from that of his partner. Each can enjoy his own happiness as well as that of the other. “If one falls down, his friend can help him up” (10).

Among the most precious gifts of the institution of marriage one must certainly mention children: “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are the sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Ps 127). This gift is more precious than



the luxurious furniture or the sumptuous apartment which a decadent generation prefers to children. On this subject Martin Luther wrote: “The greatest gift of marriage—in the interest of which one should undertake and endure everything necessary—are the fruits which God lets spring from it and commands us to raise in his service. It is the finest and most precious work on earth, for God enjoys nothing as much as saving souls.... You can thus see how rich in good works the marital state can be, since God has entrusted souls to its care, souls engendered from our own bodies, in whose interest we can exercise every Christian virtue. Surely, a father and mother are apostles, bishops and pastors as they acquaint their children with the Gospel.”

These are the joys of which Solomon says: “For this is your lot in life,” and he adds: “For it is now (i.e., in this present life) that God favors what you do.” Parents prepare Christmas gifts for their children who are looking forward to receiving them. Parents also anticipate joyfully the sight of their child’s joy over the gift received. It would be a bitter disappointment for parents if their children were to say, “We don’t like these gifts. We don’t want them.” So it is with God, our heavenly Father, who has prepared in advance numerous gifts and who, as it were, rejoices in anticipation of the pleasure these gifts will afford us. Let us not, humanly speaking, disappoint him by despising and neglecting his gifts. We know very well that life is not an uninterrupted sequence of pleasures and joys. Let us therefore not underestimate or fail to appreciate the joys that God lets come our way. They exceed the sorrows and should cause us to be grateful for the goodness and infinite love of our heavenly Father, who loves us in Jesus Christ, his Son, whom he has made our Brother.

True, the works of God remain incomprehensible to human thought and reason, but such shadows disappear before the light of divine revelation. When God causes a pious man to suffer as though that man were wicked, he is putting him to the test and is refuting the insinuation Satan made concerning Job: “Doth Job fear God for nothing?... extend your hand, and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:9–11). Remember, the same death that puts an end to all human activity may be either good or evil, “for God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice” (Ac 17:31). Yes, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). It is also good for Christians to remember that they have only one earthly life during which God showers them with blessings and during which there are tasks for them to accomplish. The lack of gratitude for God’s blessings and the deficiencies in the course of their duties through faults of their own cannot be made up after death!

**Man’s Whole Life is Dependent upon God Who Gives Wisdom and Success,  
but Human Folly Often Destroys the Good Which Wisdom Has Effected**

**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 (11).**

Solomon has observed that a man’s innate talents and endowments do not necessarily determine his success in life, but that time and circumstances have their effect too. In other words, everything depends on God who fixes time and circumstances. Thus, powerful Goliath was conquered by the stripling David because God gave David the victory. Here Solomon expresses the same truth we find in Jeremiah’s writings: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts, boast about this: that he understands and knows me; that I am the Lord who exercise kindness, justice and peace on earth” (Jr 9:23, 24).

Solomon continues to underscore the truth that man’s whole life depends on God:

**Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them (12).**

Here Solomon utters the same warning the apostle James included in his letter: “Now listen, you who say: ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’—Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (Ja 4:13–15).

Solomon continues:

**I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege-works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, “Wisdom is better than strength. But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded” (13–16a).**

From this example, Solomon, on the one hand, draws the conclusion as to the great value of wisdom: Wisdom is better than strength. But on the other hand, Solomon shows that wisdom alone does not necessarily assure success. Often human folly destroys works resulting from wisdom or does not follow through on the suggestions of wisdom. Therefore the wise man must trust in God and not in his own wisdom. It is God who must assist human wisdom and protect it against disasters threatening it from human folly.

In this particular instance the wisdom of the poor man that saved the city was quickly forgotten for it is characteristic of the world to honor the rich and to despise the poor:

**But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war (16b–17).**

It is only rarely that one quietly listens to the words of a wise man, especially if he is poor. By contrast, the foolish crowd is numerous and its members are impressed by shouting and by the noisy rhetoric of fools who are persuasive and who incite their hearers to foolish and harmful actions. The history of democratic assemblies offers numerous examples.

**One sinner destroys much good (18b).**

The reference here is to the good that a wise man has accomplished. In short, a little folly is often sufficient to put to naught great wisdom. The destructive force of a single sin or some trivial foolishness overturns a work set up with great wisdom.

## Chapter X

**As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor (1).**

In the same way that dead flies can spoil and render useless the oil prepared by the perfume maker, a little folly can destroy much good that a wise man has accomplished, and along with it the good name of that wise man which may be compared to a fragrant perfume. One need only think of Solomon himself who was certainly a man of extraordinary wisdom and who had gained great honor because of it. But his penchant for pagan women caused him to fall into idolatry. This roused the anger of the Lord who raised up Jeroboam against him. After Solomon’s death Jeroboam caused the ten tribes, the majority of the population, to defect from David’s dynasty and establish a separate kingdom. Let us therefore not be indifferent even to a single sin, for it is, in the final analysis, a folly that is capable of destroying much good.

**The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left (2).**

Wisdom has its seat in the heart and desires what is right, that which conforms to God's will, whereas folly consists in thinking and desiring what is contrary to God's will, to what he ordains.

**Even as he walks along the road the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is (3).**

When the fool walks along the road, he lacks the proper sense of direction. And even while going in the wrong direction he regards those to be foolish who are going in the right direction. In the same way, men lacking in wisdom do not strive to conform to God's will, but follow the foolish inclinations of their hearts, all the while considering those who seek to do God's will to be foolish. But the time will come, sometimes even in this life, when it becomes evident who has really been the fool.

**If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest (4).**

Here too we have a maxim of great wisdom. It sometimes happens that a man holding a government office, whether as a ruler or as a minister of state, becomes angry with a person of inferior rank. In such a case, true wisdom requires that the latter do not also give way to anger and resign, but rather that he remain calm and continue to carry out his duties. After all, an altercation between the two might result in harm to the state, whereas calm and patience may mollify an unjustified anger and awaken in the superior respect and affection toward the one whom he offended. Does not Solomon say elsewhere: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"? (Pr 15:1).

**There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves (5-7).**

Here Solomon once more returns to a truth which he has already expressed several times when it was a question of God's rule seeming to be unjust to us: slaves enjoying glory and honor and the rich and noble being treated like slaves. One can take these words literally with reference to men in general. However, they are especially true in a spiritual sense. The children of God, rich in grace and in spiritual gifts, find themselves in inferior positions, while the godless, slaves of sin and of the devil, often enjoy riches, honor and power in this world. But remember the words of Jesus: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11, 12).

**Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever digs through a wall may be bitten by a serpent (8).**

Solomon continues to compare wisdom and folly with regard to their reciprocal results. By wisdom he understands actions consistent with God's commandments. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr 1:7). On the contrary, the folly of the foolish consists in their following the wicked thoughts of their own hearts, thoughts contrary to God's commandments. Thus the wicked man digs a pit intending that the righteous man may fall into it and die; all this in the hope that he can then get hold of the dead man's possessions. But in reality God will punish him by having him fall into that same pit. Thus God in his governance on earth many a time causes the evil which wicked men wish to inflict on his children to fall on their own heads. "He who digs a hole and scoops it out, falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on him; his violence comes down on his own head" (Ps 7:15, 16). "The Lord is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their own hands" (Ps 9:16).

The second part of the verse parallels the first and expresses the same truth. Here the wicked man seeks to topple a defective wall which is full of holes and is leaning forward dangerously. Penetrating it seems easy and once inside, he can rob his neighbor. However, snakes like to hide in the crannies of such old walls, and the wicked man is bitten by such a snake. Thus the judgment of God strikes him the very moment he is committing his crime and believes himself to be succeeding at it.

**Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them (8).**

These examples are probably to be understood as running parallel to the ideas expressed in the previous verse. Solomon does not wish to give prudent advice for everyday life. He does, however, wish to show that God does often direct things in such a fashion that the wickedness which the foolish man commits leads to his own destruction. Possibly rather than ‘quarries’ the translation should be ‘moves stones,’ i.e., boundary stones. This would follow through on the idea in the previous verse of intending to harm one’s neighbor. If this is so, moving stones would refer to moving boundary stones that separate one’s own field from that of one’s neighbor, the intention being to surreptitiously increase the size of one’s own field. In such an action one can easily crush a hand or a foot, and as a result, one would suffer more than one’s neighbor. The same holds true if one wished to split logs clandestinely at one’s neighbor’s expense.

**If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success (10).**

Here too the truth Solomon wishes to express is hidden under a picture borrowed from everyday life. It is hardly probable that Solomon wanted to advise one to sharpen one’s axe well when one sets about splitting wood so as not to dissipate needlessly one’s energy in using an axe with a dull cutting edge. Solomon is speaking of the godless and foolish who wish to cut down and extirpate the wise and pious, the children of God on this earth. But lacking wisdom they are like a man who seeks to cut wood with a dull axe; they are obliged to act with violence and brutal force, only to fail in the long run. It is the wisdom of the children of God which prevails, often already on this earth, but certainly on the Last Day when God’s children will celebrate an eternal triumph thanks to divine wisdom, whereas the folly of this world will reap eternal destruction. Rather than “Skill will bring success” I prefer the translation found in the French revised version: “Wisdom is profitable to direct,” i.e. “Wisdom is bound to succeed.”

**If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer (11).**

In the Orient, even today, there are snake charmers who can exert a strange influence over snakes and prevent them from biting. Now when a snake charmer lacks proficiency in this art at a time when it is demanded of him, and the serpent bites him and death results, obviously the charmer gets no remuneration such as he would receive had he been successful. The lesson here is that we receive no remuneration if we are negligent or inept at our work and that our neighbor may even suffer as a result. But one can find still another meaning here. The serpent par excellence is the devil, who is at the bottom of sin and all its consequences. But thank God that we have an effective remedy against Satan: prayer in the name of Jesus Christ who has conquered the devil. If we neglect such prayer we are just as foolish as an inept snake charmer, and will end up being bitten by the old serpent.

**Words from a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness (12, 13).**

The words of a wise man are winsomely charming, for the true wisdom of God reigns in his heart and it is from there that he draws his good advice for every situation in life. He especially exhorts to prayer and to placing one’s confidence in God. By contrast, the words of a fool are not only of use to no one, but they are the

cause of his own downfall. He lacks wisdom; he is not guided by God's Word, but rather by the evil thoughts of his own heart, not knowing how to distinguish between good and evil. He speaks words of encouragement to those who desire what is evil and discourages those who would seek the good. He prompts men to trust in their own righteousness, wisdom, power and wealth, thus turning them away from God more and more. Consequently, for those who submit to his influence his discourse will result in complete unbelief and eternal damnation where there is no possibility for repentance.

**The fool multiplies words. No one knows what is coming—who can tell what will happen after him? (14).**

Why does the fool multiply words? Because what he says is folly, yet he would have people believe that it is wisdom. In order to convey that impression he employs what he considers to be eloquence. He promises marvelous success to those who listen to him and follow his advice. But the words of a fool are useless, even harmful to those who heed them. He promises happiness to those, who like himself, do not place their confidence in God, but in man. However, without trust in God no one can successfully set foot into the future, or prepare adequately for it. For such as do not trust in God the future can only bring misfortune (Ja 4:13–17).

**The fool's work wearies him; he does not know the way to town (15).**

The fool does not know the way that leads to town. That is why he wearies himself, traveling various roads that lead nowhere, which only take him to wrong places. The reference here can only be to the holy city where God dwells, the city of Jerusalem where the sanctuary of God is. For us, children of the New Testament church, it is the celestial Jerusalem. We reach that abode through faith in Christ. Here on earth God dwells in our hearts as a result of faith in Christ's Gospel. In the resurrection all believers will arrive in that heavenly abode concerning which we read: "Now the dwelling of God is with men" (Re 21:3).

But there are the fools—and they are many—who do not know the way to that abode in the celestial city. To no purpose do they weary themselves in attempting to reach heaven by their own efforts and merits. They are caught up in the maze of their own error and are bound for hell, for without faith in Christ there is no salvation (Ac 4:12).

**Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness (16, 17).**

The difference between wisdom and folly also manifests itself in the way a country is governed. When Solomon speaks of a king who is a child, we need not think of a child in the literal sense of the word. Such a one may well be an adult who, however, is still childish in his outlook, lacks experience, does not have the necessary wisdom to govern, is capricious and is easily influenced by evil or bad counselors. Solomon contrasts such a one with a king of an illustrious dynasty, trained in noble sentiments, who is concerned about the welfare of his people and takes advice from wise, experienced and unselfish men. His counselors are princes of a sober lifestyle who do not carouse but eat sensibly so that they may have the necessary strength to devote themselves to the arduous tasks of government. On the other hand, those who pass their time carousing are a bane upon the land. What Solomon says here concerning monarchs can also be applied to democracies. After all, in the latter case the people do not rule themselves directly, but elect those who are to govern, and they should therefore avoid choosing immature adults or debauched men. They should by preference elect wise and serious men who have the welfare of the entire nation at heart.

What is true regarding the governing of an entire people is also applicable to a household:

**If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks. A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything (18, 19).**

Solomon is speaking here of foolish people who are lazy and let their house deteriorate, whose only thought is for high living until the day when ruin overtakes them.

**Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say (20).**

Here Solomon speaks a last warning against folly and offers a bit of instruction concerning true wisdom. Why this exhortation? It is to be understood in terms of what precedes. When a king and his counselors, the latter usually being rich princes, abandon themselves to a life of debauchery, the citizens are tempted to curse them, and such discontent can easily degenerate into open rebellion. This does not mean that the wise man should approve of injustice and misdeeds on the part of those who govern, but he should not curse them and act against them in open hostility. This would be exercising human vengeance and the apostle exhorts us: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Ro 12:17, 19). Generally, revolutions do not distinguish carefully between the innocent and the guilty, while the bloody destruction attending them is worse than the bad conditions they intend to abolish. It is better to humble oneself before God, confessing one’s own sins, and to implore God to give the government true wisdom. Solomon uses a hyperbole: not even in the privacy of one’s own bedroom should one curse the ruler, for birds might publish it abroad. That is to say, what might happen is that unbeknown to one the curse might be heard and be reported to the authorities, their hatred and vengeance aroused and dire consequences follow.

The apostle says: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Furthermore: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established” (Ro 12:18; 13:1).

## **Chapter XI**

### **Some Rules for Daily Living**

**Cast your bread upon the water, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land (1, 2).**

Certain exegetes believe that Solomon is here speaking of a merchant whom he is advising as to how he can enrich himself by entrusting his merchandise to a ship bound for another land. There the wares will be sold at a good price and from there the merchant can import other goods which he can also sell at a profit in his homeland. Others hold that the reference is to the practice of sowing seed in the muddy ground in the rainy season. But we do not believe that Solomon is giving that kind of advice. It is rather this that he wishes to illustrate a truth of a spiritual nature. The second verse is an elucidation of the first. Solomon desires that a man distribute his bread, food and goods necessary to sustain life among the poor who have need of them. A miser terms such an action “casting one’s bread into the water,” wasting one’s goods and deriving no benefit for oneself. The wise man knows, however, that that which is given to the poor and needy is never lost. “For you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” That is to say: You might be struck by some misfortune yourself and then you can count on the help of those whom you have aided in their distress, thus reaping the benefits of the good you have sown. Elsewhere Solomon says: “He who is kind to the poor, lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done” (Pr 19:17). This is an important and marvelous truth. Food, money, whatever is given to a poor person in the Savior’s name, out of love for him, these goods are never lost; they are lent to the eternal God, who pays a handsome return on them, and who will some day say: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). True

wisdom knows that in giving to the Lord one does not become poorer, but, on the contrary, richer—if not in a material way, certainly spiritually.

**If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie (3).**

When clouds have accumulated too much moisture, they empty it upon the earth in the form of rain. This is a striking picture of what happens when men anger God for too long a time by a life of impenitence and sin. God’s patience is finally at an end, and his anger is poured out upon them in a cloudburst of punishments of greater or lesser severity.

There is, in addition, a divine judgment which no man can escape; all must die. “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face the judgment” (He 9:27). And just as the tree remains lying in the spot where it has fallen, be it toward the north or toward the south, so man remains in that condition in which he was over against God at the moment of his death. If he died trusting his Savior, Jesus Christ, he is saved and has eternal life, but if he died in unbelief and impenitence, he is lost forever, for after death no change is possible; the time of grace is past.

**Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap (4).**

A farmer’s work is dependent on the weather more than any other kind of activity. When the wind blows too much, he cannot sow for the seed will not fall where he intends it to. Likewise, when it rains the farmer cannot reap for the sheaves get wet and it will become necessary to dry them to prevent their rotting, not to mention the inconvenience of working in the rain and the additional work entailed. However, there are also some people who are too fearful, who never find the weather favorable enough for their field work. They waste their time observing the wind and the clouds, waiting for better weather, and only get around to sowing and reaping at too late a date, or not at all. Such people lack faith in God. Here Solomon wishes to teach a rule of divine wisdom which is not only valuable for the farmer’s work, but for all human activity in the temporal, as well as in the spiritual, domain. God created us, and in doing so gave us certain talents, placed us into the midst of certain circumstances, and imposed on us the obligation to serve him and our neighbor within those limits. We, in turn, are to meet those obligations trusting in God and believing that he will be with us at all times, even when the circumstances are adverse.

This exhortation to work with such trust in God, whose instruments we are, is again urged on us in the following verses:

**As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well (5, 6).**

Solomon returns to one of the most profound and important truths which he has already brought to our attention: all human activity is the work of God, the omniscient God, but as for man he does not know the path of the wind, nor how the body is formed in a mother’s womb. In chapter 3 Solomon has already said of God and men: “He has made everything beautiful in its time.... yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

The interaction between God’s activity and the activity of man is a profound mystery, incomprehensible to human reason. All that man does is also the working of God, but in all human activity there are mishaps and failures, according to man’s understanding; yet there are also instances of success. However, man never knows in advance if a particular activity will succeed or whether it will end in failure. This is why Solomon says that man should work from morning till evening, trusting in God, and being certain that between any two activities,

if the one should fail, at least the other may succeed. It may also be the case that both will succeed, for all depends on God; it is he who accomplishes everything, even though his work is unknown to man.

**Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. 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. Everything to come is meaningless (7, 8).**

In general, light is a symbol of joy and happiness, whereas darkness symbolizes sadness and misfortune. Solomon calls our attention to a deep truth: God has arranged human life in such a way that its early years, childhood and adolescence and the early period of adulthood, are years of light. Man enjoys his full health and strength, experiences happiness and profits from all the benefits with which God crowns those years. Man should acknowledge such goodness on God's part, for somewhat later years of darkness may well follow, the days concerning which Solomon says: "You will not enjoy them." These are the days when the darkness accompanying all sort of infirmities will obscure them, and a life of happiness will turn into sadness. There is, however, a difference between the lives of the godless and those of the God-fearing. Concerning the former the apostle says that their lives are conducted according to the principle: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." (1 Cor 15:37). The godless are intent only upon enjoying the good things of this life, forgetting God and not desiring to have any dealings with him. By contrast, the children of God see in the enjoyment of the good things of this world the goodness of God, and praise and thank him for them. They continue to love him also when the times arrive which are meaningless and futile to their human reason. The child of God knows that everything that occurs is vanity, subject to transitoriness. The days suffused with light are vanity, for they pass, not lasting forever, and giving place to the dark days, of which there are many. However, these also pass, giving place to the light-filled days of celestial and eternal joy. This hope sheds its light on the entire life of the child of God, for he believes and trusts in Jesus Christ who is the source of light and life for all.

### **All Is Vanity, but the Eternal Is Our Refuge**

At the close of his book Solomon once more affords us a general overview of human life, dividing it into youth and old age, and showing us how the child of God should comport himself during both halves in the knowledge that all is vanity, all is transitory.

Youth is comparable to a dawn heralding a beautiful day; it is springtime of man's life. Man is full of strength and health and feels his strength from the good and beautiful things which God lets him see and experience along life's road. Solomon advises him:

**Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, ... So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body (9, 10).**

Solomon encourages the young man to take advantage of his youth, to open his heart to joy, to satisfy the desires of his heart, to take delight in the grace and favor God bestows on his life. But he also gives prudent advice which should prevent the young man from falling into those sins which are especially attractive to youth. The youth is to remain within definite bounds, not exceeding the limits God has established, not throwing himself into unbridled pleasures and not satisfying the evil desires that have their origin in his sinful flesh. This is why Solomon includes the words:

**But know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment (9c).**

Here Solomon is expressing the same truth that the apostle Paul couches in these words: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done



while in the body” (2 Cor 5:10). It is good to impress this truth on young people, for they are inclined to forget that a judgment will take place after death, death seeming to be such along way off, and not warranting serious thought.

## Chapter XII

**Youth and vigor are meaningless. 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,” (11:10b; 12:1).**

Another truth which the young man should be aware of and which should move him to take advantage of his youth in a manner conformable to God’s will is that youth like dawn is vanity, passing away quickly. The days of youth pass quickly, never to return. It is in his youth that man is the recipient of most of the joys and good things which God grants, and it is at this time that he can enjoy them most. Therefore it is during his youth that he should especially think of his Creator, cognizant of his blessings and grateful for them. He should use them to God’s glory and in the service of his neighbor, for youth is followed by maturity and then by old age when his strength will have diminished along with his faculties for enjoying himself. Yes, the days will come when man will say: “I find no pleasure in them.”

One may wonder why Solomon concludes his book with a description of old age, using a great number of poetic images in the process. It might seem that youth with its pleasures is more suitable subject for poetry. But in doing what he did Solomon was employing great wisdom. He knows that in his youth man is not really aware of, and does not really appreciate the great blessings of God he enjoys. He only begins to reflect on his happiness when he begins to lose it, and when the joy of youth gives way to the moroseness and sadness of old age. Solomon describes the infirmities of age with such poetic vividness to underscore all the more the joys and blessings one enjoys in youth.

**before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark (2a),**

Light is a source of joy. When the sun shines, man is happy; when the days are dark and cloudy, man tends to be sad and depressed. So too youth is a time of joy, while the old man feels his joy ebb away and he becomes sad and gloomy.

**and the clouds return after the rain (2b);**

Atmospheric conditions are subject to continual change. Generally there is a successive rotation of rain, alternating with fine weather. After a rain one can usually count on a return of sunshine. We experience something similar in our lives. There is a successive interchange of joy and sadness, of pain and happiness. After a time of suffering and distress we can generally count on a return of happier days. This successive change of conditions more or less comes to an end in old age. The clouds return after the rain, which is to say, that old age is a more or less uninterrupted succession of sad and painful experiences.

**when the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop (3a),**

The guardians of the house are man’s arms with which he works and which he also used to defend himself against any enemies. The strong men are his legs which support his body. However, the arms and legs of the old man have become weak, have begun to tremble in their weakness and cause him pain as they perform their functions.

**when the grinders cease because they are few (v 3b),**

The reference here is obviously to the teeth, the molars which crunch man's food. As they decrease in number, mastication becomes more and more difficult.

**and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed (3c, 4a)**

The old man's eyes and ears, the two doors to the street, diminish in their function. His sight and hearing become impaired. Because of this, communication with the outside world becomes increasingly difficult and the old man is left to his own thoughts and some degree of isolation results.

**and the sound of grinding fades (4b);**

Another reference to the mouth at a time when the grinders, the teeth, the few, if any that are left, impair the distinctiveness of speech and make communication difficult, either because a man's voice has weakened, or because the lack of teeth (or in our day, ill-fitting dentures) make articulation difficult.

**when men rise up with the sound of birds (4c),**

The song of birds is heard very early, at the first light of day when most men are still asleep. Not so the old man who suffers from insomnia, and who is already awake when the first bird songs are heard.

**but all their songs grow faint (literally: but the daughters of song grow faint) (4d);**

The daughters of song are the sounds or airs one employs when singing. The old man's voice has become feeble and tremulous and he can no longer produce a vigorous song of fine tonality.

**when men are afraid of the heights and of dangers in the streets (5a);**

The old man is afraid of ascending rough paths that lead to high places because he becomes winded and is terrified of stumbling over some obstacle and falling due to his feeble and halting gait.

**when the almond tree blossoms (5b)**

The almond tree is the first tree to blossom in the spring when all of nature still seems dead. Its dazzling white flowers shine at a distance. Here we have an image of the head of the old man covered with white hair.

**and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire is no longer stirred (literally: the caper is no longer effective—cf. the Septuagint, also *plum-tree* in Cambridge Bible) (5c).**

A clumsy, slow-moving grasshopper is an anomaly. The very name *grasshopper* suggests a creature that hops rapidly from one place to another. But by comparison with the young man, the old man has become a cumbersome, clumsy shriveled grasshopper. He has lost the speed and elasticity of his members and all his movements are slow and labored.

The caper seems to have been utilized to season food and to give it an agreeable smell and taste. However, an old caper has lost its seasoning. In general, spices which serve to season foods lose their seasoning power with age. So food seems insipid for the old man when his olfactory and taste buds are no longer very effective.

**before the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well (6),**

These images are still another poetic description of the end of this earthly life. When the silver cord snaps, the result is that the golden bowl attached to it falls and breaks. It is the oil lamp which contains the light of life, and that light goes out. The pitcher breaks at the spring as does the wheel by means of which one draws water from the well. Without a pitcher or a wheel no water can be drawn; the bodily functions necessary for life cease.

**Then man returns to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets ... and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (5d, 7).**

Man leaves this earth and does not return to it again. His mourners walk about the streets, where hired professional mourners chant funeral dirges, as was and is still the case in many cultures. In these verses Solomon also confirms for us the account of creation that Moses recorded: “and the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being” (Gn 2:7). Hence one part of him returns to the ground as dust, and the other, the soul or spirit, returns to God. But Solomon lets us catch a glimpse of the beyond: Man returns to his eternal home, and this is in the presence of God and not in the dust. Besides he speaks of the judgment which will be pronounced on the whole man in the presence of God after the reunion of soul and body for which we also have the words of Jesus: “A time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his [Jesus’] voice and come out; those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (Jn 5:28, 29).

**Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity. (AV 8).**

At the end of his book Solomon once more repeats the basic truth which he set down at the outset and which is the epitome of the whole book: on this earth man and all his works are but a puff of air which soon disappears. Man dare not be confident in this regard or seek his chief happiness there. However, this truth serves to underscore another truth: God has made everything beautiful in its time and everything that God does will endure forever (3:11, 14). Hence, God, the Creator, is our eternal refuge.

**Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true (v 9, 10).**

The epilogue confirms that Solomon was the author of this book. When he calls himself wise, he is not being presumptuous, but shows himself grateful to God who endowed him with this extraordinary wisdom. God had promised him: “I will give you a wise and discerning heart so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be (1 Kgs 3:12). It is also recorded for us in the Scriptures that “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt... His fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs number a thousand and five” (1 Kgs 4:29–34). Part of this wisdom has been preserved for us in the Book of Proverbs (cf. Pr 1:1–7).

This wisdom was given to Solomon not only for his own person, but so that the Children of Israel over whom he ruled might benefit from it, as well as people living in surrounding nations. This is why Solomon goes on to say: “He imparted knowledge to the people, he pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.”

Ecclesiastes strove to find pleasant words, words which would express truth in a pleasant way, conformable to the substance treated and pleasing to the understanding of those who love truth. What he wrote is upright and true. Solomon did not flatter the godless by writing what such men like to hear, something which would please their pride and undergird their evil desires, as is so often done in secular literature. No, he wrote words conformable to divine truth and reality.

**The words of the wise man are like goads, their collect sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd (11).**

Goads are employed to get animals moving. Thus words of wisdom should provide us with encouragement and exhortation, either by showing us the love and kindness of God toward those who love him, or in calling attention to the punishments which he inflicts on rebels. Thus the words of the law as well as the words of the gospel move us to walk the way God wills. Nails serve to affix something to a certain spot so that it will not fall, slip and be lost. Thus, words of wisdom, gathered in a collection, serve to nail down the truth in our hearts, divine truth, so that man will remember it and not lose sight of it.

These words come from a single source: they are inspired by God who is Israel's Shepherd (cf Ps 80:2; Ps 23:1; Is 40:11).

**Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is not end, and much study wearies the body (12).**

Already in antiquity there was a great body of wisdom literature, addressing itself to all the questions and problems of life; so, for example, among the Egyptians and the Greeks. But Solomon warns against too assiduous a study of such literature because human wisdom is purveyed, and the study of such wisdom tires without affording true satisfaction or really proving useful in solving this life's problems, as has already been said: "Man cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end (3:11).

Solomon concludes by setting down the general rule which is basic to human life:

**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. For God will bring every deed to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (13, 14).**

The fear of God which manifests itself in the keeping of his commandments is the essence of true piety. This is not a servile fear which obeys out of fear of punishment. Such a fear causes man who has sinned to flee the presence of God. Here we are rather to understand filial respect which we experience in the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the profound veneration which we experience before God's infinite majesty and in view of his great love which has caused him to give his Son to be mankind's Savior; and in view of his holiness which is pleased to accept our testimony of love. Hence it is a matter of our observing his arrangement of things, calling for an acceptance of the gospel on faith, and of the requirement of his holy will which calls for the testimony of our love. John puts it this way: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 Jn 3:23). Peter writes: "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear (1 Pr 1:17).

The last words of Solomon match the word of St. Paul concerning the judgment: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10). The reference to judgment is an important complement of the truth that all is vanity. Yes, everything on earth is vanity, of short duration, but no human act, no word, not even a thought, is forgotten as far as God is concerned. Those who had faith in Christ, will possess the eternal life won for them, and every last good work of theirs will be rewarded; and there will be no question raised as to

their sins, for these have been fully atoned for and forgiven. On the other hand, whoever has died without faith in Christ will be punished eternally for the evil he had done.