

ECCLESIASTES:

The Confession of a Fool

JLS Paraphrase

by Jerry L. Simms

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E-mail comments to ProverbsGuy@gmail.com

	Index	Page
Introduction		1
1. How I See Life Now That I Am Old		
Everything I have done has been futile and useless. (1:1-3)		2
No one will remember me as the great man I have made myself. (1:4-11)		2
2. How I attempted to Gain Satisfaction in Life		
Through Intellectual Excellence – It did not satisfy. (1:12-18)		3
Through Physical Pleasures – They did not satisfy. (2:1-2)		3
Through Alcohol and Frivolous Things – They did not satisfy. (2:3)		4
Through Acquiring Possessions – They did not satisfy. (2:4-8)		4
I finally reached greatness in the world’s eyes – It did not satisfy. (2:9-11)		4
3. How I Hurt After Reaching Greatness		
<i>I am devastated to learn that</i>		
I must die just like a fool will die – So what good was my vast wisdom? (2:12-16)		5
God is going to take everything away from me – Now I hate myself and all my works. (2:17-26)		5
God has an appointed time for everything – I must learn to accept that truth. (3:1-8)		6
I should enjoy my work – It is what the Lord has given me to do. (3:9-15)		7
I am going to die the same way a wild animal dies – What benefit is there in being a human? (3:16-22)		7
<i>(Solomon did not even know whether he would go to heaven when he died).</i>		
Oppression hurts everyone it touches – I wish I were dead or had never been born. (4:1-3)		8
4. What I have Gained From the Venture		
<i>Things I have learned about the pursuit of wealth:</i>		
It will vaporize into thin air – Do not waste your time chasing it. (4:4-6)		8
Gathering wealth for myself is futile – Who will inherit all of it when I am gone? (4:7-8)		8
It is best to work as a team – It is the most productive way to work. (4:9-12)		8
<i>Things I have learned about ruling a nation:</i>		
People are capricious – No ruler can satisfy all of the populace for very long. (4:13-16)		9
<i>Things I have learned about making promises to God:</i>		
Be cautious when making them. (5:1-3)		9
Keep them once you have made them. (5:4-7)		9

Things I have learned about my subjects:

They should not get all worked up over oppressive rulers – God will rebuke them in His time. (5:8-9) 10

Things I have learned about the possessions and use of wealth:

Hoarding money does not satisfy. (5:10-12) 10
You can not take money with you when you die. (5:13-17) 10
Enjoy life today since it is not going to get any better tomorrow. (5:18-20) 11
A miscarriage is better than riches without contentment. (6:1-6) 11
The rich man has no advantage over a poor man. (6:7-9) 11
Enjoy life and learn to accept life the way it is. (6:10-12) 12

Things I have learned about life in general:

Enjoy life but do so with eternity in mind. (7:1-6) 12
Learn to endure life's circumstances since you cannot change them. (7:7-10) 12
An inheritance is okay, but an inheritance with wisdom is much better. (7:11-12) 13
Learn to be content with life's circumstances since you must go through them anyway. (7:13-14) 13
Do not go to extremes with anything like I did. (7:15-18) 13
Do not take seriously everything men say about you. (7:19-22) 13

Things I have learned about acquiring understanding:

It is impossible to learn everything about worldly wisdom. (7:23-24) 14
Doing foolish things is a waste of time. (7:25) 14
Contentious women are trouble, so avoid them. (7:26) 14
Whatever it is that drives men to sin is completely beyond my ability to grasp. (7:27-29) 14
Wisdom is great stuff even though it did not bring satisfaction to My soul. 15 (8:1)
Obey the ruler in authority, and let God discipline him. (8:2-9) 15
I know it goes better for a good man than for a wicked man. (8:10-15) 15
It is futile to attempt to know everything about God. (8:16-17) 16

Things I have learned about death:

Life's circumstances are uncertain, but death is sure. (9:1-3) 16
Hope for the best today because once you are dead all hope is gone. (9:4-6) 16
Enjoy life, but give it your best effort. (9:7-10) 17
Time and chance overtake us all. (9:11-12) 17

Things I have learned about wise and foolish men:

I am certain that wisdom accomplishes more than weapons of war. (9:13-18) 17
Fools and wise men simply do not mix. (10:1-3) 18

<i>Things I have learned about standing before a ruler:</i>	
Stand your ground when you know you are right. (10:4)	18
<i>Things I have learned about the way life plays interesting tricks on men:</i>	
Compare the honored and the lowly (10:5-7)	18
Compare the fortunate and the unfortunate (10:8-9)	18
Compare the careful and the careless (10:10-11)	18
<i>Things I have learned about a fool:</i>	
The fool is obsessed with talking. (10:12-15)	19
<i>Things I have learned about leading a nation:</i>	
Irresponsible leadership in government is detrimental to a nation. (10:16-19)	19
It is in your best interest not to rebel against authorities or be disrespectful toward them. (10:20)	19
<i>Things I have learned about investing money and time:</i>	
Invest your money wisely by diversifying. (11:1-6)	20
Make good use of your life while you are still young. (11:7-10)	20
<i>The conclusion of all that I have learned in life:</i>	
It's tough growing old, so make the most of your youth. (12:1-7)	21
I have been a fool –I now know that real wisdom is in doing the truth, not just knowing it. (12:8-12)	21
Loving God and obeying His Word are all that matter in life. (12:13-14)	22

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Solomon—a man who got everything he wanted but found that it didn't satisfy.

Solomon was a fascinating man. When he was only twenty years old, he began to reign as king of Israel in the place of his father, and he soon became the wisest and richest man ever to live in Jerusalem. At the beginning of his reign he was humble enough to realize that he needed help from God in order to be a good leader of his people. He asked the Lord for wisdom to judge his people well, and God gave him more wisdom than any of his predecessors. He spoke 3,000 proverbs that he either wrote personally or collected during the first twenty or thirty years of his reign, and many of them have been arranged in the form we know today as the book of Proverbs. Throughout most of his reign he did his best to teach his people the truth, but unfortunately in some areas he did not practice what he preached. Ecclesiastes is Solomon's testimonial to the truth that men must reap what they sow. By the time he reached the peak of his glory he had become a legend in his own time. He had it all: fame, wealth, wisdom, and power. His glory and splendor far surpassed all of those who had lived before him, but after he reached the pinnacle of his greatness, something happened that changed the course of his life forever. Somehow, he allowed his foreign wives to convince him to build places where they could worship their foreign gods. Solomon undoubtedly knew the command of God in Deuteronomy, telling him that he should not marry foreign wives because they would turn his heart away from the true God. Well, God said it would happen and it did. In time, his wives convinced him not only to build temples where they could worship their foreign gods but also persuaded him to worship those gods with them. This was a tragedy because he had made a vow to the Lord that he would be true to God and faithful to his people as king over Israel. When God saw Solomon's unfaithfulness to Him, He told Solomon that He was going to take the kingdom away from him and give it to one of his servants. This meant that Solomon would lose everything that he had worked so hard to gain. To make matters worse, it would all be given to a man who probably would not appreciate its value. Solomon had started well, but his life certainly ended in tragedy. The essence of Ecclesiastes 7:8 is this: how a man finishes a race is much more important than how he started the race. He had run well for many years, but in the end he lost everything because of disobedience.

When Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes he was a defeated and discouraged old man and probably in the last ten years of his life. The book is his confession of the futility that comes from a life completely devoted to his own needs and desires. Everything he accomplished, everything he learned, and everything he possessed was for the glory of his own name. His driving force was to be remembered by future generations as some really great man. When he learned that God was going to take away all that he had worked so hard to gain, he was devastated. In fact, he actually ended up with a severe case of depression. Of course, if he had lived his life for others, this tragedy would not have occurred, but his acts are history and his warnings to future generations are good incentive for each of us to avoid the same mistakes he made. As you read Ecclesiastes, please keep in mind that you are being warned by a man who had everything anyone could ever want from this world, but in the end he discovered that his life was an utter failure. During this portion of his life he saw life through the eyes of a discouraged old man. Titus 1:15 states, "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled." (KJV) At this point in Solomon's life everything he saw was bad. In essence, Solomon had played the part of a fool. Who could be more of a fool than the man who had more wisdom, more wealth, more pleasures, and more possessions than anyone else and then lose them all by turning away from the very God who had enabled him to become such a great man? This describes the man called Solomon. Mark 8:36 states "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (KJV) Solomon may not have lost his soul, but he certainly lost everything else. I hope you will learn well from his mistakes so that you do not have to experience the same heartaches and regrets as he did.

It is interesting to note that the Scriptures say nothing about whether Solomon repented of his error. It appears he merely regretted his mistakes and then worried about his losses. Then too, he never did learn to be content with what he had accomplished, acquired, or learned. He was in some sense of the word “ever learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the *real* truth” until it was too late. That was true of Solomon, but with his warnings in mind it should not be true of us. As you read Ecclesiastes, carefully consider his warnings.

1. How I See Life Now That I Am Old

My true confession

Everything I have done has been futile and useless. (1:1-3)

^{1:1} Would you please be so kind as to allow me the privilege of venting my frustrations? I am now an old man, and my life has not turned out anything like I had hoped it would. In fact, it has turned out to be a real disappointment. Let me explain.

I am Solomon, king of Israel. My father’s name was David, and he was king before me. When I was only twenty years old he made me king in his place, and I have reigned in Jerusalem ever since. During all those years I have been a preacher to Israel, and I have tried my best to teach my people the truth. ² Although I taught others the truth, I made the grave mistake of not following my own teaching. Unfortunately, I have lived my life primarily for myself instead of living it for the Lord. Some time ago I lost sight of the fact that the Lord is the one Who made me what I had become, and I began to worship my wives’ foreign gods. Now God has told me that since I have abandoned Him He is going to take away my kingdom and all that I possess. I am going to lose everything I have worked so hard to gain. Ever since God told me this I have felt so empty inside. I am shocked to learn that all of my hard work has been in vain. Everything I have done all these years has been for my benefit and my glory, but none of it has satisfied my soul. It is all a waste! What little satisfaction I did get from my work has been as short-lived as the steam that vapors from a pot. Even though I should have known better, I finally had to admit that living for myself is a futile venture. There is absolutely no satisfaction in it, but it certainly does generate a lot of regrets. ³ Can anyone show me any lasting value or advantage a man receives in all the work he does from sunrise to sunset for his own personal gain and glory? No, I do not think so!

No one will remember me as the great man I have made myself. (1:4-11)

⁴ Through the years I have wasted a lot of my energies trying to accomplish things that would make future generations remember me as a great and important man, but I now know that such will never be the case. I have come to learn that everything that I have accomplished is merely a duplication of what other men have done in generations before me. Consider this: a generation of people is born, they grow old, and before long they die. In the meanwhile, a new generation of people grows up to be just like those who preceded them. The nature of man never changes just like the laws of nature never change. In both cases nothing really changes but is merely repeated again and again. ⁵ Every day the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. ⁶ The winds blow from the north for a while and then from the south for a while. They continue their swirling path until they start their cycle all over again. ⁷ Most rivers ultimately empty into the sea, yet the seas are never overfilled. The atmosphere evaporates moisture from the seas and clouds carry the rains to the source of those rivers. There runoff waters refill the rivers so that they can flow into the sea all over again. ⁸ Men do the same tasks over and over again, and they get bored with doing them. Unfortunately, they are unable to discover within themselves a way to be happy or content while doing those repetitive tasks. The nature of man usually drives him to search for something new and fresh to experience, but the repeating of a task over again and again is especially difficult for most men. This is true because with few exceptions a man is never satisfied with what he sees or with what he hears. God has provided him with plenty to keep him occupied, but man’s nature cries out for something more. ⁹ In spite of his natural craving to excel, man needs to realize that *all of the things* that existed in past

generations are the same as those that will exist in the future, and *all of the works* that have been performed in past generations are the same as those that will be performed by future generations. There is simply nothing new that anyone can do that will in itself produce lasting satisfaction. The best any man can do is to enjoy what he does even though his job is a duplicate of what has already been done by those who lived before him.¹⁰ Someone, anyone, can you tell me if there is anything really fresh and new for me to do that has never been done before? No, I am sure no one can rightfully tell me such because I now understand that whatever it may be has not only been done but has been around long enough to have a name.

¹¹ This current generation has forgotten the things previous generations of people did, and those who will come after us will not remember the things we have done any more than we have remembered the things that occurred before we came along. The one thing that I find most depressing about this whole scenario is that no one in the future will remember me for the great man I have made myself or for the great things I have done for myself. I am devastated at the thought that I have wasted my life and have accomplished nothing of lasting value.

2. How I attempted to Gain Satisfaction in Life

Through Intellectual Excellence – It did not satisfy. (1:12-18)

¹² I have been the king of Jerusalem and the preacher of truth to my people since I began my reign.¹³ In the early years of my reign, I made up my mind to use my vast wisdom to search out and investigate everything men have accomplished on the face of the earth until I thoroughly understood everything there was to know about each one. Now that I comprehend the enormity of such a venture, I would not wish that kind of a challenge upon any man. The task is simply too demanding and too difficult.¹⁴ In spite of the enormity of the challenge, I believe that during my search I have seen most everything that has been accomplished on the earth from sunrise to sunset. My conclusion is that every one of them produces satisfaction that is as short-lived as the steam that vapors from a pot and as unfruitful as trying to catch the wind in my hands. Besides, I do not feel that a single one of the people who did those works did any better or larger quantity than the ones I have done for myself.¹⁵ Even so, whatever those folks did wrong back then cannot be corrected now, and whatever they failed to finish back then cannot be completed now. Each of those works is history.

¹⁶ I used to boast within myself about how I had elevated myself above all of my peers and had gained more wisdom, knowledge, and understanding than any other man who had ever lived in Jerusalem before me. Yet, even though I thought I was the best, none of that knowledge satisfied my soul. It merely left me overwhelmed with frustrations.¹⁷ Because I was not satisfied with what I had accomplished in the arena of godly wisdom, I felt compelled to excel above everyone else in the area of worldly wisdom. As a result, I made up my mind to learn all I could about the insane and foolish things men do to satisfy their selfish cravings and passions. I soon learned that these types of things were also as unsatisfying and unfulfilling as trying to catch the wind in my hands.¹⁸ What I did discover was that the more skill and prudence I gained in using wisdom, the more my soul was tormented, and the more knowledge and discernment I gained, the more my heart ached to find peace and contentment.

Through Physical Pleasures – They did not satisfy. (2:1-2)

^{2:1} Once it had become obvious to me that I was not going to find lasting satisfaction or happiness through intellectual excellence, I made up my mind to search out and personally experience every manner of physical gratification available. I told myself, "This is only a test, so enjoy yourself. Do not deny yourself any physical pleasure. If you like it, do it. Your experiences will prove whether these acts can satisfy your soul." I soon learned that these activities brought no more lasting satisfaction than did the intellectual endeavors.² In the end, I had to admit that trying to find happiness through physical pleasures and gaiety was the kind of useless approach a fool or an insane man would follow. I also had to admit that the gratification I received from all those

experiences brought no lasting satisfaction to my soul. I was still as unsatisfied and unfulfilled as ever, so what good did all of it accomplish?

Through Alcohol and Frivolous Things – They did not satisfy. (2:3)

³ After seeking physical gratification, I decided to try all of the different ways available to stimulate my body with alcoholic beverages so that I could discover what, if any, lasting satisfaction could be found through their use. I never actually got drunk (at least as far as I was able to tell) because I used my great wisdom and self-discipline to maintain control of my ability to think clearly. During the same period of time I also experienced many of the purely foolish things men do for amusement during their short lives here on this earth. I felt I had to experience them for myself in order to be able to accurately determine whether there was any lasting benefit or satisfaction to be gained by doing them. All the while God was looking down from heaven, seeing everything I did, and carefully recording each of my thoughts and actions in His book of records. He will judge me someday according to that book.

Through Acquiring Possessions – They did not satisfy. (2:4-8)

⁴ I thought a truly great man was one who possessed large stores of wealth and possessions, so I acquired a lot of things in an attempt to become great: I built houses for myself that were more magnificent than those owned by anyone else in my country, and I built numbers of them; I planted the finest and most luscious vineyards for myself; ⁵ I planted beautiful and productive gardens along with majestic parks filled with all kinds of delectable fruit trees; ⁶ I made ponds and lakes for myself and used them to water a growing forest of trees; ⁷ I purchased large numbers of men and women slaves for myself, and I gained even more when they married and bore children who also became my slaves; ⁸ and I possessed larger flocks and herds than any man who lived before me in Jerusalem. In addition to all these, I collected vast amounts of silver and gold along with treasures that are so valuable that only kings deserve to possess them. I acquired many singers for myself, both men and women, and best of all, I acquired what most men only dream of experiencing--lots and lots of mistresses; you know, those women called concubines who are in my palace solely for the purpose of satisfying any and all of my sexual desires and fantasies.

I finally reached greatness in the world's eyes – It did not satisfy. (2:9-11)

⁹ After acquiring all of these things, I became the greatest man in my country, and I knew it; I had more wisdom, knowledge, and understanding than any other man alive; I had more possessions than any man who had ever lived before me in Jerusalem; and I had more glory for myself than any other man living. In short, I had arrived. ¹⁰ Any time I saw something I wanted to possess I acquired it. When I saw something that was pleasurable, I did it. There were no restraints. For a period of time my heart was well pleased with all of the work I had performed, all of the things I had acquired, and all of the things I had experienced, but that temporary pleasure was the only reward I would ever receive from all of those ventures. ¹¹ All of those things were nice, but when I look back at my life and ponder the value of all I had done, I had to admit that all of them, including the pleasures with all of those women, produced satisfaction that was as short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot. All of it had left me thoroughly unsatisfied and unfulfilled. My great wealth and experiences provided no more success in satisfying my soul than I would expect to find by trying to catch the wind in my hands. Each thing I had done for myself from sunrise to sunset had been a wasted endeavor.

3. How I Hurt After Reaching Greatness

I am devastated to learn that

I must die just like a fool will die – So what good was my vast wisdom? (2:12-16)

¹² Realizing the futility of all I had done to that point, I made up my mind to use my great skill, shrewdness, and wisdom to examine the crazy and foolish things men do. I wanted to know if after I am dead and gone whether anyone would do something new, better, or different from what I had already done. I have experienced just about everything a person can do in life, and I really doubt that anyone will be able to outdo me. ¹³ Therefore, the conclusion of my evaluation was that even though wisdom did not bring lasting satisfaction to my soul, it is still as much better than foolishness as light is better than darkness. ¹⁴ A wise man sees life through eyes that are well disciplined by knowledge and understanding, and those teachable eyes guide him toward making good and productive choices in life. On the other hand, a fool goes through life with eyes that are blinded to the hurts and heartaches that come back upon him as a natural result of his foolish choices in life. Yet in spite of the vast differences between the two classes of people, both the wise man and the fool will fall prey to that unfortunate fate called death. ¹⁵ Yes, I finally had to admit to myself that I must die just like the fool must die. Since we will both suffer the same fate in the same way, what lasting benefit has my vast wisdom been to me? It seems like such a waste of my energies since in the end both the fool and I will lie in a grave somewhere. The thought that I must face this tragic end has brought even more emptiness and dissatisfaction to my soul.

¹⁶ In addition to dying like a fool, it is certain that men who live after me will not remember me any more than they will remember the fool. We will both be forgotten. It does not seem fair that even though I have been so wise I must die just like the fool. I am devastated to think that this will happen to me.

God is going to take everything away from me – Now I hate myself and all my works. (2:17-26)

¹⁷ When I finally realized that I would die like the fool and that all the labors I had done from sunrise to sunset would be forgotten, I was grieved to the point that *I hated life itself*. I hated it because all the things I had experienced merely produced more pain and unhappiness. Yes, the satisfaction that comes from every endeavor in life is as brief as the steam that vapors from the pot and as unfulfilling as trying to catch the wind in my hands. ¹⁸ Consequently, *I hated all the works I had done and all the things I had gotten* as a result of all my hard work from sunrise to sunset. I hated them because I realized that I would have to leave all of those things to a man who would someday rule in my place. ¹⁹ Then too, what bothers me even more is the realization that I will have to leave it all to a man I do not know, and I have no idea whether he will be a wise man or some fool who will squander all of the wealth I have worked so hard to gain. Regardless of who gets it all and what kind of man he turns out to be, he will have complete control over all that I have labored so hard to gain, using my great wisdom and self-discipline from sunrise to sunset. This, too, made the satisfaction from all my labor seem even more short-lived than the steam that vapors from the pot. ²⁰ As a result, I became so overwhelmed with my losses that I felt completely helpless and hopeless to control the destiny of my wealth. In fact, I ended up being completely depressed and could not cope with the realization that I had worked so hard in vain. ²¹ As I see it, it is not fair that after I had labored so long and so hard, using my great wisdom, knowledge, and superior skill that I should be forced to leave it all to a man who probably will not appreciate it since he did not have to work for it. The whole situation seems so extremely unfair and has left me feeling utterly defeated, depressed, and empty inside. The initial joy that came from my accomplishments vanished as quickly as the steam that vapors from the pot, and my lot seems like such a severe form of punishment.

²² After all, what does any man really get in return for all of the labor and hardships he has to endure from sunrise to sunset in order to amass a fortune for himself? ²³ During the day he is

constantly trying to solve the frustrating obstacles that keep him from succeeding and bring all kinds of grief into his life. Even at night he cannot sleep soundly because his mind is actively seeking solutions to his problems. Although he stays busy, his drive to get rich is a waste of time and turns to emptiness and dissatisfaction as quickly as the steam that vapors from the pot. All of it seems like such a waste of energy and so unfair.

²⁴ I am now convinced that a man can do nothing better in life than to enjoy his meals and be convinced in his inner being that all of his works are good. I have observed that this kind of joy and contentment are a gift directly from the hand of God. ²⁵ It must be so because it is certain that no man can eat his meals or enjoy his work without the Lord's blessing upon his life. ²⁶ When a man lives right in the sight of God, the Lord will give him wisdom and a deep-seated joy. This wisdom will enable him to make prudent and skillful decisions based upon sound knowledge, understanding, and discernment. While this is true of the righteous man, the Lord gives sinners the task of gathering and hoarding possessions that He will someday take away from them and give to the man who is good in His sight. The sinner's life is a wasted venture, and the satisfaction it provides is as short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot and no more successful than trying to catch the wind in his hands.

God has an appointed time for everything – I must learn to accept that truth. (3:1-8)

^{3:1} God has predetermined the right time for every event that takes place on the earth, and He is in control of every circumstance that overtakes every person. Consider these:

² There is an appointed time to be born or to give birth,	and	there is an appointed time to die or allow another to die.
There is an appointed time to plant crops,	and	there is an appointed time to plow plants under after harvest.
³ There is an appointed time to take a man's life,	and	there is an appointed time to nurse a man back to health.
There is an appointed time to demolish a building,	and	there is an appointed time to build or rebuild another.
⁴ There is an appointed time to cry,	and	there is an appointed time to laugh.
There is an appointed time to mourn a severe loss,	and	there is an appointed time to rejoice over good fortune.
⁵ There is an appointed time to throw stones away as useless,	and	there is an appointed time to gather stones for use in construction.
There is an appointed time to embrace a person,	and	there is an appointed time to withhold the show of affection.
⁶ There is an appointed time to search for a lost object,	and	there is an appointed time to abandon that search as a lost cause.
There is an appointed time to keep an object,	and	there is an appointed time to throw it away.
⁷ There is an appointed time to tear a thing apart,	and	there is an appointed time to sew it together again.
There is an appointed time to say nothing at all,	and	there is an appointed time to speak out on a matter.
⁸ There is an appointed time to love another person,	and	there is an appointed time to hate another person.
There is an appointed time to be at war,	and	there is an appointed time to be at peace .

I should enjoy my work – It is what the Lord has given me to do. (3:9-15)

⁹ If you think you have the answer, please tell me what advantage or lasting benefit results from all the effort a man exerts in doing his work? ¹⁰ I have seen all of the different kinds of work God has assigned men to do in order to occupy themselves, and He gives those jobs so that men will not become bored. ¹¹ He knows best, and no one could choose better. In fact, each job He assigns is always exactly the right one for the right man at the right time. Then too, God has put within the inner being of every person a consciousness that although his soul will live somewhere forever, his life on this earth is temporary. In contrast, God and all of His works are eternal. Even so, man has a natural drive to do something that will cause his name to be remembered by every generation following him. The major obstacle for man in accomplishing this is that God's works from the beginning of time to the very end are so far above man's comprehension that he will never be able to duplicate what God has already done. No mere human being will ever be able to do one thing that will rob the Lord of His glory. ¹² Therefore, I have finally come to understand that the best thing any man can do is to be content with his station in life and practice doing things that are good in God's sight. ¹³ It is a gift from God when a man can enjoy eating and drinking from the income of his work and be able to understand that his toil and pain are for a good purpose. ¹⁴ All of God's works and acts will last forever, and no man can add to them or detract from all the glorious things He has done. The Lord planned it that way so that men would learn to have a healthy fear and respect for Him. ¹⁵ What men have done in the past, what they do today, and what they will do in the future are merely duplications of what men have done in generations past. Since there is nothing really new any man can accomplish, stop trying to do something that will cause men to remember you for generations to come. It will never happen. God wants you to do the work He assigns, do it joyfully, and do it to the best of your ability. The work you are assigned is not by accident. God gave it to you for a purpose, so enjoy it. Never let the fact that others before you have done a certain thing defeat you or rob you of the joy that comes from enjoying your work and doing a good job.

I am going to die the same way a wild animal dies. – What benefit is there in being a human? (3:16-22)

(Solomon did not even know whether he would go to heaven when he died).

¹⁶ In addition to all of this, I have seen that from sunrise to sunset doing wickedness is a more prominent practice than either justice or righteousness. ¹⁷ In light of this truth, I have reminded myself that God has a time and a place prepared when He will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man for every thought and deed they have ever done. Do not make the mistake of thinking you will not have to stand before God to be judged because He will not fail to keep His appointment with you. ¹⁸ God has already put mankind to the test and has concluded that man's basic nature is no more moral or loving than that of savage animals. Any man who would take an honest look at the men of the world would have to agree.

¹⁹ Man's similarity with savage animals is even more pronounced when it comes to that unfortunate event called death. They both breathe the same air, and they both die the same death; therefore, with regard to death, there is no benefit in being a man rather than an animal. The whole idea leaves me feeling defeated and discouraged. ²⁰ When either a man or an animal dies, his body goes to the grave, and since they were both created from the dust of the earth, they will both return to dust. ²¹ *After all, who really knows for certain whether the soul of man goes upward to God or descends into the earth below like that of a wild animal?* My father said he knew, but I have no such assurance. ²² Regardless of where the departed soul goes, I am convinced that a man can do nothing better in life than to be happy with all of his activities and accomplishments. He might as well accept his lot in life and start enjoying it now because he has no way of knowing whether fortune or misfortune will come his way in the future.

Oppression hurts everyone it touches – I wish I were dead or had never been born. (4:1-3)

^{4:1} After I reconciled the fact that I was going to die the same way fools and wild animals die, I turned my attention to all the acts of oppression and unfairness which were being perpetrated throughout the whole world. What I saw was such a tragic sight. Those who were being oppressed cried because of their pain and suffering, but no one was there to give them comfort during their grief. On the other hand, I saw how those who were oppressing others freely exerted their power over the less fortunate, but no one was there to help or comfort those oppressors when loneliness and turmoil engulfed them. ² After seeing this, I congratulated those who had already died more than those who were still living because the dead no longer have to endure the pain and suffering of oppression. The living must endure it every day. ³ Certainly those who have never been born are much better off than both the living and the dead. Those unborn souls will never have to see or experience the unfairness and suffering that results from all the oppression taking place on the earth from sunrise to sunset.

4. What I have Gained From the Venture

Things I have learned about the pursuit of wealth:

It will vaporize into thin air – Do not waste your time chasing it. (4:4-6)

⁴ I have considered every kind of work and skill that men perform in their pursuit of wealth, and I have concluded that all of them are the result of jealousy fueled by greed. It is merely one man trying to take work away from another man so that he can have more wealth for himself. It is ironic, too, because a greedy man will never be able to get enough money or acquire enough possessions to satisfy his soul. Whatever satisfaction he does experience from pouring his whole being into his selfish labors will be as short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot and as successful as trying to catch the wind in his hands. ⁵ On the other hand, a fool goes to the opposite extreme. He hates the thought of physical labor, so he lays back, folds his hands, and refuses to work. In doing so he destroys his own body through laziness. ⁶ It is good to work, and it is good to rest, but do not be a workaholic or a lazy man. Even so, a little bit of rest and relaxation are much better than the pain of immersing yourself in your work. There is more to life than work. Besides, engaging in the hot pursuit of wealth is like trying to catch the wind in your hands. Just like the wind slips through the hands of the one trying to catch it, so wealth usually slips through the fingers of the one pursuing it.

Gathering wealth for myself is futile – Who will inherit all of it when I am gone? (4:7-8)

⁷ After this, I considered another exercise in futility that occurs from sunrise to sunset. ⁸ There was a certain man who was single; he had no wife, children, or siblings, yet he worked day and night to gain more riches. He never was satisfied with how much he acquired nor did he ever stop to ask himself, “I am going to have to leave my wealth to someone I do not even know, so why am I depriving myself of life’s pleasures by working so hard?” This kind of pursuit is a miserable way to live, and it produces satisfaction that is as short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot.

It is best to work as a team – It is the most productive way to work. (4:9-12)

⁹ Two people working together are much more productive than one working alone because they can help each other generate a much greater profit. ¹⁰ If one of them gets hurt or becomes sick, the other can nurse him back to health and work for him while he regains his strength. On the other hand, if the one who is all alone is injured or becomes sick, he will have no income while he is

disabled.¹¹ In addition, when two lie down together they can keep each other warm, but there is no way one man can keep himself warm.¹² Then too, it is easier for an attacker to overpower one man than to attack two men who can come to each other's aid. The effectiveness of two men working together is similar to that of a stranded rope; a single strand can easily be broken, but three or more strands together are much stronger. Trying to break all of them at one time becomes a real challenge.

Things I have learned about ruling a nation:

People are capricious – No ruler can satisfy all of the populace for very long.
(4:13-16)

¹³ I once heard about an old king who was no longer willing to learn anything. In his realm there lived a young man who was teachable, and even though the lad was a poor man, the people saw him as a much more desirable leader than the old king.¹⁴ The young man was born in the kingdom, and even though he had just been released from prison, the people still wanted him to rule over them.¹⁵ Regardless of his background, I have seen multitudes take their stand with him and support him as a replacement for a foolish king.¹⁶ There is no end of the number of people who are alive today, of all who have lived before me, or of all who will live after I die, but this one thing is true: human nature never changes. Although people were happy with the young man initially, in time they grew disenchanted with him just like they did with the unteachable king. People are fickle, and their loyalty changes as quickly as the steam that disappears when it vapors from the pot. Men always seem to be striving for something new or better, but such a venture is as unsuccessful as trying to catch the wind in their hands.

Things I have learned about making promises to God:

Be cautious when making them. (5:1-3)

^{5:1} Be very cautious about what you say and do when you enter the church to worship God, and when you go, do so strictly for the purpose of listening for God to speak to you. He will teach you as a father would his son if you are willing to obey Him. It is much better to listen to God with the intent of obeying what you hear than to offer the sacrifice a fool freely gives. He goes to church primarily to have an opportunity to proudly state his opinion of what he thinks God requires of him rather than listening so that God can state what He really wants. The fool has no idea that he is sinning by speaking his mind and making rash vows instead of listening.

² Never make a commitment to God out of impulse. Wait until you have had time to think it through and are sure that it is really what you want to do. Even after you are convinced that it is the right thing to do, take your time and be deliberate when you make a promise to God. Once you decide to actually make a vow, keep your communication with Him brief because He is in heaven with awesome power and glory, and you are here on the earth in humility and weakness before Him. He already knows your heart's desires and attitudes, so why feel you have to say anything at all?³ Maintain this cautious attitude because whatever you wish to do for God can be accomplished only through much hard work and diligence. On the other hand, the fool's only labor is his continual, flippant talking about all the things he intends to do for God. Do not be like him, but perform what you have promised to God and do it thoroughly.

Keep them once you have made them. (5:4-7)

⁴ Once you have made a commitment to God, keep your promise and do not be even one moment late in doing so. It is important that you keep your promise because the man who does not keep his word is a fool, and God is never pleased with that kind of a man.⁵ It would be better if you had never made a vow than to make one and fail to keep it.⁶ Do not allow yourself to sin by speaking words you do not intend to keep. If a messenger of the Lord confronts you about why you

have not kept your promise to God, do not try to lie your way out of it by saying it was a mistake. Why should you cause God to be angry with you because of your insincere words? If you do so, He will make sure that all of your works not only fail but also end in disaster.⁷ Before you promise something you are not committed to doing, just remember that empty dreams and insincere promises are no more productive than planting a fruit tree in the Sahara desert. In the same way planting the tree is useless, so your dreams are useless unless you are committed to seeing them to completion. If you fear the Lord and truly honor Him for the great God that He is, you will do what you say. In the end you will find that your obedience will bring sweet fellowship and rich blessings.

Things I have learned about my subjects:

They should not get all worked up over oppressive rulers – God will rebuke them in His time. (5:8-9)

⁸ If you happen to see an official oppressing the poor by using extortion to exploit them or some other official pronouncing good men guilty of a wrong they have not committed while pronouncing wicked men innocent of a wrong everyone knows they have committed, do not be shocked at the sight. There is no need to become so worked up that you feel you must take matters into your own hands. God has put officials in place to watch over those under them, and there are more officials higher up than they. If oppression is taking place before you, you can be sure that in due time God will prompt the right official to see the errors being committed and bring those responsible to justice.⁹ After all, a ruler who apprehends and punishes the criminals of his nation gives real stability to that nation. Therefore, since it is God's place to extract vengeance, allow Him to do it in His time and in His way.

Things I have learned about possessions and the use of wealth:

Hoarding money does not satisfy. (5:10-12)

¹⁰ Any man who is consumed with the love of money will never be satisfied with whatever amount of money he acquires, and the man who is driven by the desire to amass larger and greater quantities of possessions will never own enough things to satisfy his greedy heart. The satisfaction gained from the quest for getting money and owning things is as unfulfilling and short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot.¹¹ The more money you make the more you spend, and when you acquire an abundance of things there will always be people around you who are ready and willing to be your friends in order to help you enjoy them. After all, you can use only a certain amount of what you possess, and beyond that, everything you acquire is of no use to you other than to be admired with greedy and selfish eyes. What good does that do?

¹² When a hard working man lies down to go to sleep, it is a pleasant experience regardless of whether he has eaten a small portion of food or has eaten until he is full. Such is not the case for the rich man, though, because his full stomach, coupled with his anxious thoughts, will not allow him to sleep peacefully.

You cannot take money with you when you die. (5:13-17)

¹³ I have seen an unfortunate and painful situation take place on the earth. I know because I am experiencing it. It happens when a man is made miserable by the loss of the very riches he practiced hoarding.¹⁴ Consider, for example, a man who has a son and has plenty of wealth to use in caring for him. Then, through one bad investment he loses everything he owns and is left with no financial means of caring for his son.¹⁵ Even if this man had not lost his riches, he came into the world penniless and naked and he will leave this world in the same condition as he came. After a lifetime of laboring with his hands, he will not be allowed to take one penny of his wealth with him.¹⁶ The fact that a man will die exactly as he was born is a terrible evil in my eyes. What did he really gain from

all his toils when he must leave it all behind? I say he gained nothing at all. His efforts to find happiness through riches were as unsuccessful as trying to catch the wind in his hands.

¹⁷ Throughout his life he ate his food as a lonely man even when people were present with him. At the same time, he experienced the dark shadow of inner turmoil, physical sickness, and anger that are common to every man who makes riches his god.

Enjoy life today since it is not going to get any better tomorrow. (5:18-20)

¹⁸ I have learned that the best and most productive way to approach all of the work you perform from sunrise to sunset is to eat your meals with contentment and enjoy life during the few years God allows you to live on this earth. This is important to remember because, as I see it, this kind of joy is the only kind of reward you will ever receive from all of your hard work.

¹⁹ In addition, when God chooses to give a man riches and wealth, He also gives him the gift of being able to enjoy eating from them, to enjoy making a good profit so that he has more to share with those in need, and to be able to enjoy the work itself. ²⁰ The man who is blessed in this fashion will not look back with envy at what are sometimes called the good old days, and he will not dread the potential misfortunes that might come his way in the future. God will keep that man so busy enjoying his work that he will not have the time nor the desire to look back.

A miscarriage is better than riches without contentment. (6:1-6)

^{6:1} There is an unfortunate situation that happens to certain men day after day, and it is more widespread than you would think. ² This tragedy takes place when God allows a man to acquire great riches, wealth, and honor among men, but although he has everything anyone could ever desire from this world, those things do not make him happy. In fact, his own selfishness causes him to be absolutely miserable. To make matters worse, God works out circumstances so that someone the rich man does not even know is given the privileged of enjoying the use of his possessions and spending his wealth in his place. I do not understand how life can be so unfair. It seems to me that this kind of emptiness and misery are such a cruel and severe form of punishment. ³ Tell me if you can, suppose a man has a hundred sons and lives to be one hundred and twenty years old. What benefit is all of his wealth to him if he is miserable the whole time and does not even have a proper burial at his death? This man would have been better off had he died from a miscarriage. ⁴ At least with a miscarriage, the sorrow and grief are soon forgotten and the baby's name quickly passes into obscurity. ⁵ The benefit to the dead child is that he has never had to endure the disappointments and discouragements that plague every living person each day of his life. Therefore, the child who dies by miscarriage is certainly better off than the man who lives with anguish and emptiness all of his life. ⁶ Then too, everyone dies and ends up in the grave, so what advantage is there to a man even if he could live two thousand years and yet be miserable the whole time instead of enjoying the good things of God? The answer, obviously, is none whatsoever.

The rich man has no advantage over a poor man. (6:7-9)

⁷ As I see it, every man works for the purpose of feeding his own mouth, yet eating never brings lasting satisfaction because it will not be long before he must eat again. ⁸ The wise man saves for the future while the fool squanders all he gains on today. If neither the rich nor the poor man is satisfied by eating food, what advantage does a wise man have in his abundance over a fool who has nothing? Then too, what advantage is there to a poor man who knows how to get along well with respect to his neighbor but does not have enough resources to feed his own family? ⁹ I am confident that being content with what you have in your possession today is much better and more useful than dreaming about what you might be able to acquire in the future. Be content with what you have. I can speak from experience that if you are not enjoying life, all of the knowledge, wisdom, and riches in the world will not bring any more fulfillment or long-term satisfaction than you would gain by trying to catch the wind in your hands.

Enjoy life and learn to accept life the way it is. (6:10-12)

¹⁰ Everything that exists today is a duplication of what has existed in the past. In fact, every one of those things already has a name. God not only knows what men need and desire but causes events to come about in their lives that are best for His purposes. Mortal men may think circumstances should have turned differently, but they cannot argue about such things with a God of such strength and power. If men would face reality they would know that mere mortal man has no hope of winning this argument with such an awesome God. ¹¹ Men may talk a lot about what they intend to do and how they plan to achieve their goals, but if God desires otherwise, the harder they try to do those things, the more frustrated they become. So what good does it do to argue with God about what you desire to do when He has already made up His mind what will happen? ¹² After all, who knows what is really good for himself during the few years he lives here on the earth? No matter how long you live, those years will seem as short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot. I am sure you will agree that there is no one living who can accurately predict what will happen day after day once he is dead and in the grave. Nobody knows, so just accept circumstances as they come and enjoy life.

Things I have learned about life in general:

Enjoy life but do so with eternity in mind. (7:1-6)

^{7:1} A good reputation is more refreshing to the soul than the best ointments or perfumes to the body, and it is better to die leaving oppression behind than to be born into this world to face a lifetime of oppression. ² Then too, it is more profitable to go to the funeral home where you can learn to take life seriously than to be an irresponsible person who wastes his life going from one party to another. After all, every person living will die, and most everyone takes life seriously when he finally comes face to face with death; you might as well learn to do it now in order to be properly prepared for the day when you die and go into eternity. ³ There is more to be gained by enduring sorrow with a good attitude than by living life as though it were one big party. Even though a man's face may show sadness when he experiences some great loss, he may be rejoicing inside because of the joy God has put into his heart. ⁴ Every man who is really wise has made up his mind to take life seriously and strive to fulfill his responsibilities well, but a fool sees life as one big fun time and wastes his days on any pleasure he can find to experience. ⁵ Heeding a wise man's rebuke and then doing it produces much better results than listening to the foolish songs a foolish man sings all day long. ⁶ Those songs are like the crackling of a burning bush; in the same way a bush is consumed by the flames, so the fool is consumed and destroyed by the very lightheartedness and frivolity he propounds. His manner of living is equally as unproductive and short-lived as the steam that vapors from the pot.

Learn to endure life's circumstances since you cannot change them. (7:7-10)

⁷ Oppression is forced upon men by means of cruelty, extortion, injury and unfairness. While most men find a way to endure such harsh treatment, these kinds of inequities will drive a wise man insane. A man who extorts what he wants through bribery will find that the bribe he wields will be the very thing that corrupts his heart and soul. ⁸ It is good to start a race well, but the most important part of the race is how you finish; a man who is patient in every situation is much better off than a man whose proud, arrogant, and boastful heart drives him to lose his temper each time he demands something and does not get his way. ⁹ A fool is always quick to lose his temper, so do not be quick to lose yours too. If you do you will become just like him. Do you really want people to perceive you as a fool? ¹⁰ In addition, learn to be satisfied with the circumstances of life that come your way. You might as well because it profits nothing to ask, "Why was it so much better years ago than it is today?" A man who is really wise would never ask such a question.

An inheritance is okay, but an inheritance with wisdom is much better. (7:11-12)

¹¹ An inheritance is a valuable possession to those still living, but it is much more valuable when it is accompanied by wisdom. The person who possesses both of these has a great advantage over the man who has the inheritance only. ¹² Both money and wisdom provide protection; money protects against financial setbacks and losses, but wisdom protects against life's setbacks and losses. The advantage of wisdom over money is that it preserves a man's soul for eternity while money preserves his possessions but only for a short time.

Learn to be content with life's circumstances since you must go through them anyway. (7:13-14)

¹³ Stop what you are doing long enough to ponder all of the things the Lord has done for you in the past, and recognize how He is working in your life today. God may have allowed hard times and difficulties to come your way, but no man can make life easy for himself when the Lord has chosen to do otherwise. ¹⁴ Enjoy life during your days of prosperity, but when life's trials and difficulties come your way, consider this: It is God's direct intervention that brings about both the good times and the hard times. He decides what is best for you in order to accomplish His purpose each day. You may never understand why He allows you to experience unfairness or hardships, but He works everything out for His glory. You have no way of knowing what will transpire tomorrow or after you are dead for that matter, so learn to be content with your present circumstances for as long as you live.

Do not go to extremes with anything like I did. (7:15-18)

¹⁵ I have seen everything humanly possible during my lifetime of wasted and unsatisfying years. I have seen the man who was morally pure and practiced doing good experience an early death even though he consistently lived a godly lifestyle. I have also seen the man who practiced sinning live a long life even though he consistently practiced his sinful lifestyle. ¹⁶ Although it is good to be morally pure and practice doing good, in my opinion you should not overdo anything, even being good. It is good to be wise also, but it is not good to pursue it to excess. Why would you want to go to extremes and ruin your life like I have ruined mine? ¹⁷ On the other hand, a little bit of wickedness is okay, but it is not good to go overboard living a wicked lifestyle or to waste your life living like a fool. After all, why should you die prematurely? ¹⁸ Just remember there is virtue in being good but not too good, and there is virtue in avoiding sinful practices but not to the point of avoiding every sin. Keep in mind that people from those who were good and from those who were evil have been genuinely converted and have come to possess a real fear of the Lord. It can happen to any man who is willing to repent of his sins and trust Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Do not take seriously everything men say about you. (7:19-22)

¹⁹ If you practice using wisdom you will have a much better chance of success than a group of ten men who are in authority over a city but cannot get along with each other or work together. ²⁰ No one lives his whole life without committing a single sin, ²¹ so do not take seriously everything people say about you. If you do, you might be offended when you hear a co-worker curse you. That person may be under a lot of stress and say something about you carelessly, ²² but undoubtedly there have been many times when you have been under stress and hurt someone else by saying things before you stopped to think about what you were saying. Think about it for awhile.

Things I have learned about acquiring understanding:

It is impossible to learn everything about worldly wisdom. (7:23-24)

²³ After carefully examining all of the selfish and oppressive acts men commit on a regular basis, I have determined that there is no wisdom in any of them. Therefore, I made up my mind to learn everything I could about worldly wisdom. It did not take long, though, before I concluded that the task was far beyond my ability to complete. ²⁴ In a way I am not surprised, because all of those acts are so extremely difficult to understand. I ask you, "Since I am so extremely wise and cannot understand these things, do you think anyone else could understand them either?" No, I don't think so. They are so hard to comprehend that no one from previous generations has been able to understand them either.

Doing foolish things is a waste of time. (7:25)

²⁵ So, I decided to pursue a thorough investigation of all the stupid and insane things men do in this world. I made up my mind to know *how* each act was being done and *why* a person would want to do such things. I did not necessarily have to experience each of them for myself, but if I needed to do the thing in order to understand it I did so. I felt I must understand both what was being done and why someone would do it so that I could come to a well educated conclusion. My goal was twofold: I wanted to determine whether there was any wisdom in the evil and foolish things people did, and I wanted to be able to explain both the benefits and the detriments that result from each. I also wanted to understand all of the moral implications that come from doing stupid and ignorant acts. The main thing I wondered was why people squander their time doing such insane and senseless things when those same acts produce no lasting value or benefit.

Contentious women are trouble, so avoid them. (7:26)

²⁶ During the course of my search, I was shocked to discover a very destructive kind of woman. In many ways this woman is like a black widow spider. She has a wicked heart that drives her to entangle unsuspecting men in her web of sin. To be caught by her is more unpleasant than death itself. She spreads her web, designed to take a permanent hold on a man. When she gets her hands on him, her sinful practices hold him as securely as if he had been bound by strong chains. Be on your guard, young man, because anyone who disregards or scoffs at God and His Word will become easy prey for her, and she will destroy him. On the other hand, the man who heeds God's Word and strives to do right will recognize her trap and escape her grasp.

Whatever it is that drives men to sin is completely beyond my ability to grasp
(7:27-29)

²⁷ I, the Preacher, have thoroughly searched out everything within my grasp and have added all the facts together to come to the best possible understanding of all the things men do and why they do them. ²⁸ I am still searching, but I must admit that there is still a lot I do not understand. It seems that some things will always remain beyond my ability to explain. It is painful for me to have to admit, but I have finally faced the fact that they cannot be discovered.

This one thing is true: I have found only one man out of a thousand who has the kind of knowledge and discernment that makes him wise, but I have not found a single woman who has that same kind of wisdom. ²⁹ I have found only this, that God created Adam and Eve pure in the beginning, but ever since that first sin, men have corrupted themselves to the point of being no better than brute beasts. Men of every generation have constantly sought out any avenue they could find to practice their wicked devices.

Wisdom is great stuff even though it did not bring satisfaction to My soul. (8:1)

^{8:1} Can you think of anyone who can compare favorably with a wise man who is discerning, perceptive, and resourceful enough to explain clearly a given matter and expound its meaning? A wise man's wisdom enlightens both his mind and his understanding so that he is able to make good decisions based on sound knowledge. Each time wisdom brings him good results, his normally serious face radiates with a joy that flows from his inner being so that everyone can see it.

Obey the ruler in authority, and let God discipline Him. (8:2-9)

² I strongly recommend that you follow the dictates of the ruler of your country because he is responsible to God as the result of his oath of office stating that he would rule with justice and truth. ³ Do not be quick to abandon his authority or be party to an insurrection because he will do whatever he desires regardless of what you think about it. ⁴ Since he has been given such power to rule over you, who will reprimand him or demand of him, "What do you think you are doing?"

⁵ Any man who keeps the laws of the land will not experience any of the troubles that lawbreakers endure because a wise man knows both the right way and the right time to do things. ⁶ Yes, there is a proper way to do everything, and there is a proper time to do it; this principle is true even when your leader does not rule well. ⁷ Since no one knows for sure *what* will happen in the future, who can go to the ruler and tell him *when* something will transpire in the future? ⁸ No one has the ability to use the winds to confine the winds, and no one has the authority to alter the day of his death. In the same way that no man receives a leave of absence during a time of war, so practicing more evil things will not deliver a wicked man from the troubles that are the natural consequences of such practices. ⁹ I have seen and evaluated all of the different situations in which one man is allowed to exercise unfair or harsh authority over another man, and even though oppression occurs often, the conclusion of the matter is that obeying the ruler in authority is still the best thing any person can do.

I know it goes better for a good man than for a wicked man. (8:10-15)

¹⁰ So then, I have lived long enough to see numbers of wicked men die and be put into the grave. Many of them went to church on a fairly regular basis and acted like they were religious people. Those actions would have been fine if their purpose for doing so had been genuine, but as soon as they left the church they would immediately go back to their sinful practices. They were not dead long before even the people in their own town had completely forgotten they had ever existed. The temporary pleasures and possessions their wickedness brought to them were of no benefit to them in the long run. ¹¹ These wicked men were not afraid of being caught or punished for their sin because they saw other people getting away with their sin without being punished. Any time men see that punishment is not administered quickly they cast aside all restraints and become fully consumed with the practice of satisfying their lustful desires. ¹² This much is true, a man may sin hundreds of times and be privileged to live a long life, but in spite of such unusual fortune, I am still convinced that life will be much more pleasant and beneficial for the man who is not ashamed to let everyone know that he fears the Lord and demonstrates that fear by turning away from every form of sin and evil. ¹³ I also know that since the man who practices evil does not fear the Lord, he will usually experience a life filled with hurts and heartaches followed by an early death. ¹⁴ Most people who perpetrate wickedness experience troubles and most who are morally pure and practice doing good experience blessings. Yet, there are some righteous men who appear to be destroyed by the same kinds of catastrophes as the wicked, and there are some wicked men who appear to receive the same kinds of favor and blessings a righteous man receives. This does not seem fair; in fact, it seems pointless. When average people see the way good men are not always rewarded with good and the way evil men are not always punished for their evil, they do not see the benefit of being good over being wicked. As a result, they lose any incentive to live a good and godly lifestyle. ¹⁵ Even though life is not always fair, I will gladly praise the man who enjoys life because there is nothing better for him from day to day than to enjoy his meals and find happiness in the work he performs each day. If you live this way, such a lifestyle and attitude will provide you with all of the

understanding you need to weather the storms of life successfully and all of the strength you need to endure the difficulties of your work during the years God allows you to live on this earth.

It is futile to attempt to know everything about God. (8:16-17)

¹⁶ In the early years of my reign, I had a burning desire to search out and understand all of the things that God has done on the earth and to be able to explain them fully. ¹⁷ The more I saw and the longer I pondered on what I was able to learn, the more I realized that mortal men are not capable of discovering or understanding all of the works of God. A man may spend a lifetime of twenty-four hour days searching and studying, but he will never learn it all no matter how hard he tries. The magnitude and complexity of God's works are so far beyond man's ability to comprehend that he will never understand them all no matter how hard he tries. If you ever hear a man who professes to be wise say, "I understand all of these," do not believe him because he is merely deceiving himself.

Things I have learned about death:

Life's circumstances are uncertain, but death is sure. (9:1-3)

^{9:1} After carefully evaluating all I have learned, I have concluded that the circumstances of life for both the righteous and the wise man are carefully planned and executed by God. Let me explain it this way: All of the activities men do and all of the circumstances that overtake them are solely at God's discretion. He not only orchestrates those circumstances but gives men opportunities and responsibilities for each day as He sees fit. No man knows whether tomorrow will bring days filled with love and kindness or those overflowing with rejection and hatred. You have no way of knowing what God will send your way tomorrow. ² Yet regardless of the uncertainties that lie ahead, there is one thing about which every man can be certain: he will die. No one will escape it. With regard to death, it makes no difference whether you practice doing good or doing evil, whether you live a good and clean life or a perverted and wicked lifestyle, or whether you go to church to worship God or refuse to enter the doors of a church. It makes no difference whether you are a good person or the worst of sinners or whether you curse God or are afraid to do so. Death will still claim you just like it will every other person. ³ It seems to me that since we will all die, it really is unfair that each man must go to the grave without regard to his standing before God or before men. Since a good man dies and goes to the grave just like a wicked man, many people cannot see the difference nor understand the benefit of living a pure and clean life. Because there appears to be no distinction, most men are totally given over to the pursuit of sinful practices and the desire to do foolish and insane things as long as they live. In the end, these sinful people die and go to the grave the same way as the righteous man.

Hope for the best today because once you are dead all hope is gone. (9:4-6)

⁴ As long as a man is living he can hope for better circumstances than he experienced yesterday or the day before. Life may be trying, but even under the worst of conditions being alive is better than being in a grave somewhere. Everyone would agree that a live flea-bitten mutt is much more valuable than the lifeless carcass of a lion. ⁵ This much is true: Those who are alive know that death is coming someday, but dead men know nothing. In fact, the dead will never receive any more reward for their labor because they cannot work. Then too, people soon forget that those dead men ever existed. ⁶ Without exception, their passion to love, to hate, and to excel above their peers will all have descended into the grave with them. In the stillness of death their departed soul no longer has the privilege of being part of any of the things living men do here on the earth from day to day. It is simply too late for them. This is why it is so important to take life seriously now and make the most of it while you have the opportunity.

Enjoy life, but give it your best effort. (9:7-10)

⁷ In light of the options available to you, make up your mind that you will eat your meals with joyfulness and maintain a cheerful heart while you have the opportunity. You certainly should because God has already given His stamp of approval to the works of your hands, and He looks favorably upon each one of them. ⁸ Once you have made up your mind to enjoy life, make the most of it. Take a bath, put on clean clothes, and put something on your hair so you can comb it neatly. Having done this, ⁹ enjoy life with *the woman* you married in your youth. Share your life with her for as long as the Lord allows both of you to live. Life is short, so make the best of your circumstances. You might as well because as I see it this is the only reward you will ever receive from all the work and effort you exert during your lifetime. ¹⁰ Whatever you find to do in life, give it your very best and do it with all your might while you are still alive to do it. You have only this life in which to accomplish any work because once you die and are buried there will be no more opportunity to work, no more ability to do any planning, no more awareness of what work needs to be done, and no more ability to use skillful and cunning workmanship. All of these will have been left behind in the land of the living while you lie there in the grave.

Time and chance overtake us all. (9:11-12)

¹¹ I have observed that many times life does not turn out like we had planned. Things just happen, and we cannot explain them. I now understand that the race of life is not necessarily won by the man who is quicker than his neighbor, the battle is not necessarily won by the strongest or the most fierce fighter, bread is not necessarily gained by the man who can always understand hard problems and implement their solutions, wealth is not necessarily gained by the man who can accurately determine the most productive place to invest his money, and favor is not necessarily obtained by the man who possesses the greatest skill or talent. All of these abilities are good and desirable, but it must be remembered that in spite of all our efforts to accomplish our goals, the effects of time and the uncertainty of chance overtake all of us. ¹² In addition to this, men do not know when, where, or how life's uncertainties will come upon them. Adverse circumstances have a way of engulfing us in a moment, with no warning, and at the most inconvenient times. These kinds of unfortunate situations have a way of surprising us in the same way a fish is surprised when it is caught in a net or a bird when it is caught in a hunter's trap.

Things I have learned about wise and foolish men:

I am certain that wisdom accomplishes more than weapons of war. (9:13-18)

¹³ I have seen something else that has impressed me, and it is a good example of wisdom being put into practice. ¹⁴ There was once a small city with very few fighting men living in it. One day a great king with a massive army encircled that city and completely cut off access into and out of it. It looked as though the city was doomed. ¹⁵ It would have been except the men of the city found a poor wise man who lived there, and through his wisdom the city was delivered from the attacking king. The unfortunate part of the whole incident was that after the ordeal was over, no one remembered that poor man for the wisdom he displayed.

¹⁶ When I meditated upon this, I said to myself, "Without doubt, wisdom is a much better possession than strength because wisdom can deliver a man from the strongest of foes." Yet, it is still unfortunate that the words of wisdom spoken by a poor man are normally disregarded by the populace simply on the basis of his poverty. ¹⁷ Even so, it is still true that the words of a wise man heard in the quietness of the moment are much better than the irresponsible shouting of a foolish ruler to a gathering of foolish men. ¹⁸ There is no doubt in my mind that wisdom is more successful at accomplishing its owner's desires than the mightiest weapons of destruction. Yes, wisdom is good, and even though a wise man may accomplish a great deal of good, the carelessness of one sinner can quickly destroy much of the good wise men have worked hard to accomplish.

Fools and wise men simply do not mix. (10:1-3)

^{10:1} If a fly falls into a vat containing oil used in the making of perfume and it is not removed, the whole batch of oil will end up smelling putrid. If that oil is used to make perfume, the whole batch of perfume will smell awful. Likewise, if a fool is allowed to practice a little bit of his foolishness, in a short time he can do more damage than all the good that wise and honorable men are able to accomplish over a long period of time. ² The heart of a wise man directs him toward the right where he tries on every occasion to do what is right, and doing right is the catalyst that will bring blessings and all manner of good things his way. On the other hand, a fool allows his foolish heart to steer him off course to the left where he does whatever seems desirable at the moment. Because he takes this approach to life, he makes decisions based upon the dictates of his own heart without sound guidance and reaps all manner of troubles and heartaches as a result. ³ The fool makes such a mess of things that even when he does something as simple as walking down the road, the manner in which he behaves himself shows everyone that he is indeed a fool.

Things I have learned about standing before a ruler:

Stand your ground when you know you are right. (10:4)

⁴ If a ruler becomes extremely angry with you when you present your position on a particular issue, do not apologize or back down from what you have asserted. Maintain your composure, because if you do so, you will find that your confidence in what you believe is the very thing that will be the most helpful when you present your defense to that ruler.

Things I have learned about the way life plays interesting tricks on men:

Compare the honored and the lowly (10:5-7)

⁵ From time to time I have seen serious injustices take place on the earth, and they seem as unfair and undeserved as when a ruler makes a mockery of justice by using poor judgment. ⁶ An example of such injustice can be seen when a fool is elevated to a place of authority over wise and prudent men or when a truly wealthy man is forced to humble himself and sit in a seat reserved for people of least importance in the kingdom. ⁷ I have also seen slaves riding royal horses while princes walk alongside like a slave would normally do. Life plays interesting tricks on men sometimes, and it just does not seem fair. I know because I have experienced unfairness in my life.

Compare the fortunate and the unfortunate (10:8-9)

⁸ It is good to be careful, but there are some situations that are completely beyond our control. These unfortunate experiences seem so unfair, and it really is unfortunate that any man should have to experience any of them. Consider these possibilities: a man digging a deep pit may be careless enough to fall into it, a man boring a hole through a wall may be bitten by a snake waiting on the other side, ⁹ a man quarrying stones may be crushed by one that he cuts, and a lumberjack may be crushed by the very tree he is cutting down.

Compare the careful and the careless (10:10-11)

¹⁰ There are also things that result from a man's own doing. If a man has a dull axe and is unwilling to sharpen its edge, he will have to exert a lot more energy to split logs. Wisdom has a real advantage over ignorance because using wisdom gives a man good success. For example, a wise man would certainly sharpen his tool so that he could accomplish more work with less effort and in a shorter amount of time. In the same manner that sharpening an axe produces good results, so the use of wisdom has the advantage of giving its owner good success in whatever he attempts to do. ¹¹

After all, what good is a tool if the owner does not know how to use it properly? A truly wise man would not take a chance charming a snake, but if a man does attempt to do so and is bitten by the snake before he even starts playing his pipe, he has profited nothing by use of the snake.

Things I have learned about a fool:

The fool is obsessed with talking. (10:12-15)

¹² A wise man always tries to speak the truth in kindness and then says only what is necessary for the occasion. On the contrary, a fool is consumed with speaking his opinion on every matter, and then he feels compelled to keep on talking even after he has finished what he has to say. ¹³ When a fool starts talking, he speaks words propounding foolish and useless ideas, and by the time he is finished, he has progressed to the point of speaking things that are wicked, immoral, or insane. ¹⁴ All the while he is totally unaware of the difficulties his continual talking generate for him. Most men have some idea of their limits of understanding, but the fool is so engrossed in what he thinks he knows, he is convinced that he can even foretell the future. ¹⁵ By the time he finally finishes talking, he is so worn out that he cannot even figure out how to get home.

Things I have learned about leading a nation:

Irresponsible leadership in government is detrimental to a nation. (10:16-19)

¹⁶ If the ruler of a nation is young or immature, he may allow his public servants to party from early morning until late at night. When they conduct themselves in this manner, disaster is sure to follow. ¹⁷ On the contrary, when a ruler is a responsible servant of the people, he demands that his ministers eat at appropriate times and for the purpose of nourishing their bodies instead of partying or getting drunk. When they conduct themselves in this manner, the whole nation experiences rich blessings. ¹⁸ It is through neglect and laziness that the rafters of a house begin to sag, and it is through lack of maintenance that the roof leaks. A government deteriorates in much the same way when its ministers lack diligence and self-discipline. ¹⁹ Wise authorities use good discipline to perform their duties well, but irresponsible officials use their position as a means of pursuing prestige and pleasure. Undisciplined men of authority hold the philosophy that they have the right to party whenever they wish and that spending money will fix any problem. Obviously these people are deceived.

It is in your best interest not to rebel against authorities or be disrespectful toward them. (10:20)

²⁰ Regardless of a ruling authority's attitude or track record, do not curse him or say bad things about him even when you are alone in the privacy of your own bedroom. The walls sometimes have a way of talking. The same holds true with regard to speaking badly about a wealthy man. The walls of your house may end up shouting your words to the whole world. Did you ever stop to think that someone just might happen to hear your words and fly away to tell the authorities what you have said? If that happens, you will be awfully embarrassed when those authorities appear at your home to reprimand you for your careless and critical attitude.

Things I have learned about investing money and time:

Invest your money wisely by diversifying. (11:1-6)

^{11:1} With regard to *your possessions*, be generous enough to share some of your resources with people who are genuinely in need. If you do so on a regular basis, God will see that your own needs are always met, and He may do it by prompting someone else to help you in the same way you have helped others. The principle of sowing and reaping always works this way.

² Regarding *the portion of your possessions you decide to invest for the future*, do not put all your eggs into one basket. It would be good to invest your money in seven or more options. You need to diversify because there is no way of knowing which investments will perform well and which ones will do poorly. ³ Consider how sometimes the clouds drop rain as they pass over your fields, yet you have no way of knowing which clouds will bring those rains. It does not matter which direction a tree falls because whatever direction it falls is where it will remain. It is a done deal, and there is nothing you can do about it. You must learn to accept your losses and go on with life. The same holds true for your investments. Enjoy the times your investments make good returns, but do not fret over the losses.

⁴ In addition, it is good to research an investment, and you ought to do so, but if a man feels he must know every last detail before he invests his time or money, he will never make the investment. If a farmer waits until the wind conditions are exactly right before he plants his fields, he may never plant them. Likewise, if a farmer waits until the weather conditions are exactly right before he harvests his crops he may lose all of his potential harvest. Regardless of the reason for his hesitation, he will forfeit all that he might have gained. ⁵ No man can accurately predict what the weather will be like in the future any more than he can know how the Lord causes the bones of a baby to be formed in its mother's womb. In like manner, no man can accurately predict whether God will cause his investments to produce an increase or be a loss. It is strictly up to the Lord's wishes in the matter.

⁶ Now do this, and you will be successful: Go to work at the first light of dawn, and do not stop working until the last light of sunset fades. This is the best way to approach work because you cannot tell whether the work you do in the morning or in the evening will be what produces a good return. Who knows, maybe both of them will do well and produce a good profit?

Make good use of your life while you are still young. (11:7-10)

^{11:7} It is such a pleasant experience to enjoy seeing a beautiful sunrise or sunset. You should thank the Lord each day that you can see the sun at all because when you grow old your eyesight may fail. If that happens you may never see the sun again. ⁸ Therefore, learn to enjoy life and make the most of each day. Even if you live a hundred years, be sure to enjoy life, but do not forget about those trying and difficult days of the past. Without doubt, there will be many more awaiting you in the future. As I see it, everything that transpires in the future will produce only more emptiness and dissatisfaction in the end anyway. Yes, everything that is to come will be useless and unsatisfying. ⁹ Therefore, enjoy life and be happy while you are a child and take pleasure in it while you still have the strength of your youth. Pursue everything you want to do and acquire everything you desire to possess if you feel these things are that important to you, but be warned that when life is over God will judge you for everything you have done in this life. He will scrutinize each act and thought regardless of whether it was good or evil. ¹⁰ In light of this fact, quit worrying about your troubles and learn to live with your body's aches and pains. Enjoy life while you have the opportunity because both your childhood and the prime of life are quickly passing away. One day you will become old like me, and then it will be too late. Your youth will fade away as quickly as the steam that vapors from the pot. Trust me, you will see it soon enough.

The conclusion of all that I have learned in life:

It's tough growing old, so make the most of your youth. (12:1-7)

^{12:1} Be sure to keep your Creator in mind every moment of the day so that all of your decisions and actions will please Him. Do it while you are still young and continue doing so throughout the prime of life. This is important because those miserable days of old age will come upon you soon enough. When they do arrive you will say as countless others and I have said, "I want nothing to do with being old".

² Remember the Creator now because this is what will happen to you when you grow old:

your eyesight will begin to fail;

you will not be able to see the sun, the moon, or any of the other heavenly bodies;

the skies will remain dark even after the rains have ended and the clouds are gone;

³ your watchmen will begin to tremble from weakness and your mighty men will become stoop-shouldered;

your grinding wheels will stand idle because so many of your servants will have died, leaving too few to do the work;

your eyesight will degenerate to the point where everything seems to appear very darkly tinted;

⁴ you will need assistance going anywhere outside your home;

you will become so hard of hearing that you will barely hear the sound of the grinding mill;

and any little disturbance will awaken you and you will not be able to get back to sleep.

⁵ In addition, your body will degenerate with old age, and you will begin to fear many things. You will most likely become afraid of some or all of these things:

of heights,

of dangers on the highways,

that your fruit trees will not produce,

that insects will ruin your crops, and / or

that your medications will no longer be effective.

Then in time, you will die an old man, be buried, and go to your eternal home while those who are still alive wander about in the streets mourning for you.

⁶ Do not think that the curse of old age will not happen to you because unless you die prematurely, all of these things will take hold of you. In light of this truth, remember your Creator before the prime of life is past, before your health and strength are gone, and before your body starts to fall apart. ⁷ You can be certain that after these things take control of your body you will die, and your body will return to the dust from which it was made. Then your spirit will be ushered back to the place where God made it, and there it will be judged by Jesus Christ the Messiah¹ who gave you that spirit. With all of this in mind, live for your God now before it is too late.

I have been a fool –I now know that real wisdom is in doing the truth, not just knowing it. (12:8-12)

^{12:8} I am so frustrated and full of regret when I look back and see how I wasted my life. I know now that I have been a fool and that living solely for myself was the cause of this tragedy. It seems odd that although I was the preacher of truth all these years, I did not learn to do the things I taught others. Oh, I wish I had lived my life for others, but it is too late for me now. I am so unfulfilled and dissatisfied with life that everything I see appears empty and unrewarding to me.

⁹ Even though I am now a discouraged old man, I still desire to teach the truth just like I did during all my years of being the preacher. In the prime of life I did a lot of things that were really good. In addition to being the wisest man who ever lived in Jerusalem, I did my best to teach the people of my kingdom real knowledge. During that time I either collected or wrote 3,000 proverbs. ¹⁰ As the preacher, I searched for the most accurate and effective way of presenting those proverbs and put

many of them into a book you now know as Proverbs. Others have added to it, but most of them are mine. I did this so that the real truths contained in those proverbs could easily be understood by anyone who really wants to know them.¹¹ Men who have mastered these proverbs and the words these masters speak are a real help to people who hear them. They help the hearers in these ways: First, they prompt people to either start doing things that are right and good or to continue doing so. In fact they are a tool that is equally as effective in motivating men as an electric cattle prod is in motivating cattle to move at your command. Second, these wise men are like steel spikes that have been firmly anchored in a rock where men can tie onto them for security. Finally, both the wise men and their words are given and are made effective by the same person—Jesus Christ, our Savior, Shepherd, and Messiah.¹² Beyond learning these truths in order to use them to serve the Lord, remember that writing books can go on forever and excessive devotion to studying books will weary even the strongest man in time. Therefore, discipline yourself to use moderation.

Loving God and obeying His Word are all that matter in life. (12:13-14)

^{12:13} After everything has been said and done and the sum of all my experiences have been carefully evaluated, there are only two valid deductions that can rightfully be made regarding how every man should conduct himself in this life. Your life will go much better if you learn them as early in life as possible. First, study and meditate upon the Scriptures until you gain a healthy fear of the Lord, and then practice the fear of the Lord by turning away from every form of sinful practice. Second, learn to love the Lord with every ounce of your being, and then demonstrate that love by obeying God's commands and faithfully doing good. These two things apply to every person¹⁴ because life is not made up of this earthly existence only. After you die you will exist somewhere forever, and then every one of your acts and thoughts will be judged by the Lord. It does not matter whether your actions and thoughts were good or evil because no matter what they were, they will not be exempt from judgment. Without fail every deed will be brought to light and justice will be administered. Do not be foolish like I have been; I squandered my life by living only for myself and what I could get out of it. I now know that there is much more to life than pleasures and possessions. Choose to start living for the Lord today because you now have the opportunity to learn from my mistakes so that you do not have to make the same ones yourself. Once you have decided to serve the Lord with every ounce of your being, make up your mind that you will faithfully practice doing good and consistently avoid sinful practices. Living for the Lord is the only way to find real contentment and satisfaction in life. Now that you know this, how will you live your life? I understand now, and although it is too late for me, you still have time. Make the best of your opportunities.

¹ Christ said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (KJV) Therefore, the phrase "Jesus Christ, our Savior, Shepherd, and Messiah" has been used in place of "one shepherd."