

I Intro. (Sept. 2, 2007)

Here we have a concession to wisdom, namely that, even if only temporally, it is greater than folly by leaps and bounds (Ecc. 2:12-13). However in the end, both the wise man and the fool will come to the same end (vv. 14-15). Solomon's discouraging explanation is that both will be forgotten (vv. 16-17).

## II A Concession to Wisdom (Ecc. 2:12-17)

A. Solomon makes a concession to wisdom (Ecc. 2:12-13).

1. (vs. 12) Having concluded that laboring for pleasure and material things is meaningless (Ecc. 2:1-11), Solomon "turned" again "to 'do a thing,'" namely, to attend to the matters of wisdom, madness, and folly (1:12-18) in his quest for meaning in a kind of reexamination to see if perhaps he missed something. Wisdom here is "ethical and religious (and one ought to) behold"<sup>2</sup> it. "Wisdom is the way of the moral and spiritual man."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, "folly" is "is the way of a man with twisted values."<sup>4</sup> In between is "madness," a term which, "stresses the irrational aspect of insanity."<sup>5</sup> "The basic meaning of the root emerges most clearly in"<sup>6</sup> our vs. David displayed this kind of behavior on purpose in 1Sam. 21:13 when he acted insanely, "So he disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard."

The question, "for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done?" simply pointed "out that his experiment with the value of pleasure could perhaps be duplicated but not exceeded."<sup>7</sup> "The king realized that few people would be able to check the results of his experiments. Few if any would have the resources he had at his disposal to duplicate his experiments."<sup>8</sup> So Henry says that we

ought to "acquiesce in Solomon's judgment of the things of this world, and not to think of repeating the trial; for we can never think of having such advantages as he had to make the experiment nor of being able to make it with equal application of mind and so little danger to ourselves."<sup>9</sup> "None ever can have the same means of testing what all earthly things can do towards satisfying the soul; namely, worldly wisdom, science, riches, power, longevity, all combined."<sup>10</sup> All should dispense utterly with the notion of trying. Sadly most members of the human race have not heeded that advice, but to this day still harbor visions of grandeur that meaning can be found "under the sun," without considering what is above the sun. Chesterton wrote, "The more plain and satisfying our state appears, the more we may know that we are living in an unreal world. For the real world is not satisfying"<sup>11</sup> (G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), British author [of]. *Charles Dickens*, "Dickens and America" [1906].).

2. (vs. 13) Even within the confines of the closed system of "under the sun," Solomon noticed something, he "saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness," that is, "wisdom" has an "*advantage beyond, (or) more than*"<sup>12</sup> "folly" in the same manner that literal "light" enjoys an "*advantage beyond, (or) more than*"<sup>13</sup> literal "darkness." One cannot imagine a greater disparity. How could Solomon reach this conclusion in light of 1:17, 18, "And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain"? The answer is to be found in the perspective that he takes on wisdom.

B. In the end, both the wise man and the fool will come to the same end (vv. 14-15).

1. (vs. 14) Here Solomon expands on his previous statement about the excelling of wisdom over folly. He pointed out that the "wise man's eyes are in his head." It is important to remember that when the term "eye" is used here,

<sup>1</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 815.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 315.

<sup>3</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. c1980. 625.

<sup>4</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. c1980. 625.

<sup>5</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. c1980. 219.

<sup>6</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. c1980. 219.

<sup>7</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 982.

<sup>8</sup>Tom Constable. Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible. Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003. Ec 2:12.

<sup>9</sup>Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry's Commentary : On the Whole Bible. electronic ed. of the complete and unabridged edition. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996. c1991. Ec 2:12.

<sup>10</sup>Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 2:12.

<sup>11</sup>The *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press.

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<sup>12</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 452.

<sup>13</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 452.

“More than the (physical) eye itself is implied by this word. Occasionally it represents the whole process of seeing and by extension, of understanding and obedience (Jer 5:21).”<sup>14</sup> The emphasis here seems to be upon understanding. Solomon had wisdom and thus understanding, which served him well, even if limited to this realm under the sun, as contrasted to “the fool (who) walks in darkness” - “the latter term being, ‘equivalent to *fatal error, blind infatuation,*’”<sup>15</sup> or simply culpable “ignorance.”<sup>16</sup> “A wise man has the foresight to avoid danger while a fool gets into trouble as though he stumbles around in the dark (2:14; cf. Prov. 4:18-19 for a similar metaphorical use of light and darkness).”<sup>17</sup>

“Yet” in the end, there is that sobering acknowledgement that Solomon was compelled to make for it was the only one that was in compliance with the facts: “I know that one fate befalls them both.” The term “fate” is a word meaning here “the happening and/or occurring of that which is (for the most part) beyond human control...The dilemma of Eccl is heightened by the ostensible meaningless of human accomplishment and overriding control (Prov 16:33) of divine providence (Eccl 2:14; 9:11; 3:19)...It has rightly been said that the idea of fate or chance is utterly foreign to the Hebrew mind (G. H. Trevor, ‘Chance,’ ISBE, I, p. 593).”<sup>18</sup> Man cannot escape the reality of death, whether foolish or wise. From the perspective of how things go in this life only, wisdom far outstrips folly, but when death arrives and one is in the cemetery, both are the same, again as viewed from under the sun.

2. (vs. 15) Here Solomon further explained himself by talking to himself: “Then I said to myself,” literally, “Then I thought in my heart,”<sup>19</sup> “As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me,” literally, “According as the event is to the fool, it happens to me, even me.”<sup>20</sup> This essentially repeats the statement of vs. 14, “And yet I know that one fate befalls them both,” the

wise man and the fool, that is. The term fate means, “accident, chance, fortune” but here, not fortune, but “*accident, chance.*”<sup>21</sup> It seems to me to point to the inevitable outcome of death, and therefore does not have much to do with either accident or chance except in considering the surprising number of ways death might come, not to mention its timing. For death *does* “happen, (or) occur.”<sup>22</sup> Of course the English word “fate” refers to “The supposed force, principle, or power that predetermines events...The inevitable events predestined by this force.”<sup>23</sup> I seriously doubt if Solomon had *that* imaginary force in mind, even if the event of death was understood by him to be inevitable, which it was indeed.

So the natural question arose, “Why then have I been extremely wise?” or “wise to excess or overmuch?” Why would Solomon wise to express regret about this? It is in part to the fact that such wise required great discipline, effort and work. Life might have been much easier without the exercise of such discipline in wisdom.

Not being able to come up with a satisfactory answer under the sun, Solomon could only conclude what he always concluded, “This too is vanity,” pointing once again to “the fruitlessness of all human enterprise and endeavour.”<sup>24</sup>

C. Solomon’s discouraging explanation is that both will be forgotten (vv. 16-17).

1. (vs. 16) His presupposition is that for something to be other than vanity, it requires permanence, eternity, something he was hard pressed to find. “For” Solomon explained “there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool.” Whatever we might like to think, there is “no *perpetual* memorial,”<sup>25</sup> if viewed only under the sun. However, the Psalmist said, “The righteous will be remembered forever,” but that is an above the sun perspective, which is not Solomon’s immediate concern. Oh sure, the

<sup>14</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980. 662.

<sup>15</sup>Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 2:13.

<sup>16</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 365.

<sup>17</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 982.

<sup>18</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980. 814.

<sup>19</sup>The New International Version, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

<sup>20</sup>Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible Adam Clarke, LL.D., F.S.A., (1715-1832)

<sup>21</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. 899.

<sup>22</sup>R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980). 814.

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<sup>24</sup>Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000). 210.

<sup>25</sup>Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 2:16.

memory of both will linger for a while, but not for long, “inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten.” Notice the sense of totality in the word “all,” that is, “all” for both the wise man and the fool. If all will be forgotten it stands to reason that everybody left will forget it, otherwise not all will have been forgotten. Unless the concepts of permanence and eternity can be meaningfully introduced into the realm of man, then this life can have no meaning. Solomon is struggling with that reality here, but he cannot escape self-evident exclamation: “And how the wise man and the fool alike die!” That is when the forgetting begins. The truth under the sun is that “*the wise* are prosperous: true, in sceptical view of Ec., they have no advantage over the fool Ec 6:8; but die as the fool Ec 2:16.”<sup>26</sup> Seldom does the actual memory of any man extend beyond the next generation or perhaps two.

2. (vs. 17) These conclusions hit Solomon very hard indeed: “So I hated life.” He then explained why: “for the work which had been done under the sun,” pointing to the difficulty of the various tasks “was grievous (lit. ‘evil’) to me.” “‘Grievous’ (4:17, Heb. *ra*) is the opposite of ‘advantage’ (1:3, profit).”<sup>27</sup> Life with all of its “Events” have gone “awry” for Solomon “and (are) filled with distress”<sup>28</sup> because of their temporariness. He found the whole thing to be, “*bad, unpleasant, giving pain, unhappiness, misery.*”<sup>29</sup> Life for Solomon came to have a “lack of quality” because it was “unable to meet standards of value or function beneficially,”<sup>30</sup> again because of its evanescence (someth. that will “dissipate or disappear like vapor”<sup>31</sup>); it was fleeting, and would soon “pass out of sight.”<sup>32</sup>

The lack of finding an ultimate meaning is stated in his causal statement for the rest of the verse, now a common refrain in Ecc.: “because everything is futility and striving after wind.” The

reference under “wind” is to a “*vain, empty thing,*”<sup>33</sup> that is, something with no real value. Note that “striving” could be translated “longing.”<sup>34</sup> How strange to imagine people longing after wind, and then striving for it.

### III Conc.

Though having conceded that as far as how things go in this life, wisdom far exceeds foolishness, yet in the end, Solomon was left in despair because of the principle of death, which is the great equalizer in that respect. Beside soon all will be forgotten. So he was left to conclude once again that, “everything is futility and striving after wind.”

<sup>26</sup>Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 315.

<sup>27</sup>Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible, Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003. Ec 2:12.

<sup>28</sup>R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980), 855.

<sup>29</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000, 948.

<sup>30</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980, 855.

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<sup>33</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000, 925.

<sup>34</sup>Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000, 946.