

I Intro. (Sept. 9, 2007)

Solomon was just thoroughly frustrated to the point of hating life, when he realized that, though there was a tremendous advantage in having wisdom versus foolishness in *this* life, yet “the wise man and the fool alike die” (Ecc. 2:16b). That frustration carried over into this section (Ecc. 2:18-26), especially in light of the fact that his wealth, accumulated through years of labor, would be transferred to someone else who might not appreciate it at all (2:18-21). So Solomon saw no ultimate use of all for all his effort (2:22-23). In the end, he resolved to continue to work and enjoy the fruit of his labor, while acknowledging that all of it was from God (2:24-26).

In the larger section of 2:18-6:9 in which “the root *amal* (Heb.), translated ‘labor,’ ‘toil,’ or ‘work, occurs 26 of its 37 times in Ecclesiastes, the apparent futility of human labor or toil will be repeatedly and empirically made clear.”¹

II The Value of Human Toil in General (Ecc. 2:18-26)

A. Frustration over his last will and testament (2:18-21)

1. (vs. 18) Here we see Solomon’s lingering frustration over the futility of the fact that the wise man and the fool wind up in the same place with nothing. Here specifically he “hated all the fruit of” his “labor for which” he “had labored under the sun,” lit., “I hated all my toil,”² which stands by metonymy for what the results it suggests, namely, fruit or production. The focus is on his work, but the frustration was “because there was no permanence to its fruits, to the things he accomplished through it.”³

The lack of permanence regarding his work galled Solomon, as he explained regarding his hatred for the fruit of his labor, “for I must leave it” or “*bequeath*”⁴ it “to the man who will come after me.” For “leave,” the LXX has ἀφίω (*present, active, subjunctive*), lemma, ἀφίημι, meaning, “*let someone have someth...give*.”⁵ In agreement with Solomon, the

Psalmist said, “The stupid and the senseless alike perish, and leave their wealth to others” (Ps. 49:9b). And again, “Surely every man walks about as a phantom; surely they make an uproar for nothing; he amasses *riches*, and does not know who will gather them” (Ps. 39:6). God said to the rich man in Lk. 12:20, “You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and *now* who will own what you have prepared?” This should be sobering for every reader.

2. (vs. 19) From Solomon’s perspective, it would have been impossible to know whether his heir would “be a wise man or a fool.” “Yet” regardless of whether or not he was a fool, Solomon acknowledged that “he” would still “have control,” or “*exercise power (over), dominate, have mastery*”⁶ “over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun.” It was bad enough just to leave his wealth to another (vs. 18), but worse by far if he were a fool, unbearable in fact. This person might “be a spendthrift, a dummy, a playboy, a loafer, but he”⁷ would “inherit the estate nevertheless.”⁸ So again predictably he said “This too is vanity.” “Perhaps Solomon foresaw that his son, Rehoboam, would squander by his folly all that he had toiled so hard to accumulate. History tells us that Rehoboam did just that. By refusing to listen to his older counselors, he precipitated the division of the kingdom. When the Egyptians invaded Judah, he bought them off by giving them the temple treasures. The gold shields went to swell the coffers of Egypt, and Rehoboam had to substitute brass shields in their place (see 2 Chron. 12:9–10).”⁹ What a sad legacy!

3. (vs. 20) “Therefore” this possibility logically led to the following: “I completely despaired” “Lit., *turned aside my heart to despair*,” “of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.” The picture seems to be that Solomon figuratively turned “(in a new direction) to do something,”¹⁰ namely, to be in

⁶Harris, 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. 928.

⁷William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

⁸William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

⁹William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

¹⁰Francis 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). 685.

¹New Geneva Study Bible. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 2:18.

²Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

³Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

⁴Brown, 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. 629.

⁵Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 157.

despair, which indicates a “complete loss of hope,”¹¹ of ever being able to discover a satisfying meaning for this life “*under the sun*” (Italics added.).

4. (vs. 21) Solomon is really talking about himself in the third person here saying in the conditional part of the sentence, “When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge” or “*discernment, understanding,*”¹² not mere facts, “and skill (that is, advantageously, properly, suitably - Cf. BDB under *כֶּשֶׁר*¹³),” resulting in great success, “then” in the concluding part of the sentence, “he gives his legacy” or “*portion, award...profit, reward,*”¹⁴ the accumulated wealth of his life’s work, “to one who has not labored with them.” So the one does everything and winds up with nothing, the other does nothing and winds up with everything. No wonder Solomon said, “This too is vanity and a great evil,” “not in itself, for this is the ordinary course of things, but ‘evil,’ as regards the chief good, that one should have toiled so fruitlessly.”¹⁵ Evil has the possible meanings, “*injury, wrong...harm...mischief.*”¹⁶ “The whole idea distressed him, that a man who builds up financial resources through wise investments, shrewd business decisions, and skillful moves is forced at death to leave it to someone who never did a lick of work for it or expended an ounce of worry. What is this but an absurdity and a great calamity?”¹⁷

One can avoid this misery by bequeathing to his children a spiritual heritage instead. Luther prayed, “Lord God, I thank You, because You have been pleased to make me a poor and indigent man upon earth. I have neither house nor land nor money to leave behind me. You have given me wife and children, whom I now restore to You. Lord, nourish, teach and preserve them, as You have me.”¹⁸

B. Solomon saw no ultimate use of all for all his effort (2:22-23).

1. (vs. 22) Here he is back to his fundamental issue again, his search for meaning in the arduous experience of daily effort, “For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving (from the word also meaning, ‘purpose, aim...longing’¹⁹) with which he labors under the sun?” The answer to the rhetorical question is “nothing,” at least nothing lasting and fulfilling. This is really a restatement of the previous verse in question form.

2. (vs. 23) Here he gave the reason for the assumed answer to his rhetorical question, that is, a man gets *nothing* “Because all his days his task is painful and grievous (or vexatious – ‘Full of annoyance or distress,’²⁰ perhaps leading to anger at times); even at night his mind does not rest (or ‘relax’²¹). This too is vanity,” or again, “vapor, breath”²² and thus ephemeral and evanescent, pointing to the “impermanence”²³ of the fruit of Solomon’s effort. Many are familiar with restless nights, when in pursuit of daily bread the mind refuses to shut down, though both it and our bodies are desperately in need of rest.

All of this is from Solomon’s perspective of “under the sun,” this life viewed as if this is all there is or ever will be. To see the proper perspective on the believer’s work, see 1Cor. 15:58.

C. Solomon chose to work and enjoy the fruit of his labor (2:24-26).

1. (vs. 24) Here Solomon brings in a little of God’s perspective on his plight. In light of what he has already said, he concludes that this life offers nothing more than, and that there is therefore “nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good.” A man can do no better under the sun in this life than to enjoy its legitimate pleasures derived from the hard work that he does. “The Preacher is not advocating gluttony and drunkenness but rather finding pleasure wherever possible in the common

11The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

12Brown, 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. 395.

13Brown, 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. 506.

14Francis 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). 324.

15Jamieson, 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 2:21.

16Brown, 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. 949.

17MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. c1995. Ec 2:21.

18William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995). Ec 2:21.

19Brown, 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.

20The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

21Brown, 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. 1012.

22Harris, 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. 204.

23Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

things of life.”²⁴ Solomon observed that this “is from the hand of God,” his way of saying that this is the will of God for us under the sun (cf. Ecc. 3:12-13; 5:19; 1Tm. 6:17; 1Cor. 10:31; 1Th. 4:11-12; 2Th. 3:12; Jm. 1:17).

2. (vs. 25) The rhetorical question requires the obvious answer, “no one,” whether we read with the NASB, “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?,” or the NKJV, “For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?”²⁵ If the latter reading is correct, then Solomon may be saying, “If I, then, with all my opportunities of enjoyment, failed utterly to obtain solid pleasure of my own making, apart from God, who else can?”²⁶ This would be similar to the meaning of 2:12b, namely, that Solomon’s experiment is final. If the other reading is correct, then Solomon is saying that the very ability to enjoy the basics of life is a gift of God.

Kidner says, “in themselves, and rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good. Food, drink and work are samples of them, and Qoheleth will remind us of others (cf. 9:7–10; 11:7–10). What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give.”²⁷

3. (vs. 26) Solomon’s perspective here is still under the sun. He understands rewards and judgment from that perspective as well. Clearly then “to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.” In other words for the person effectively living in a manner that is pleasing in God’s sight, he will receive divine blessing in the form of wisdom and knowledge and joy here and now. On the other hand, to the person who is not good but living disobediently as a “sinner (‘miss the goal or path of right and duty...against God’²⁸)” God has ordained that he will have “the task of gathering and collecting” for the purpose “that he may give to one who is good in God’s sight,” or living obediently. Solomon is teaching the general principle that in this world the righteous man will prosper and the wicked will lose what he

accumulates to the one who lives righteously. One commentator said that this was “True, literally, in the Jewish theocracy; and in some measure in all ages (Job 27:16, 17; Job 27:16, 17, Pr 13:22, 28:8). Though the retribution be not so visible and immediate now as then, it is no less real. Happiness even here is more truly the portion of the godly (Ps 84:11; Mt 5:5; Mk 10:29, 30; Ro 8:28; 1Ti 4:8).”²⁹

III Conc.

Donald R. Glenn offers these helpful comments on the final paragraph, “Two points from 2:24-26 should be noted. First, Solomon stated that God’s disposition of wealth and the enjoyment of one’s labors and its fruits are based on whether a man is pleasing to God or is a sinner. As is clear from the words ‘the man who pleases’ God and ‘the sinner’ elsewhere in Ecclesiastes (7:26; cf. 8:12), this implies that a person will be judged on the basis of his ethical behavior and his trust in God or lack of it. Second, Solomon wrote that this judgment would take place in this life (not in a life after death) and would involve temporal not eternal rewards. These two points (enjoyment of life and judgment), which are brought together only here, are crucial in the development of the book.”³⁰

Dr. Constable concurs, “In these verses Solomon implied that God’s rewarding or punishing a person for his trust in God and his ethical behavior would take place before death. This is normally what happens (cf. Proverbs). Therefore Solomon’s counsel is good advice. However from later revelation we learn that final judgment will take place after this life and that God’s rewards are not just temporal but eternal (cf. Job’s problem). Therefore as believers we can find greater satisfaction in our work itself than Solomon could. In short, later revelation has not invalidated Solomon’s views but enriched them.”³¹

²⁴William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file]*, electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

²⁵The New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982. Ec 2:25.

²⁶Jamieson, 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 2:25.

²⁷Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Ec 2:24.

²⁸Brown, 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. 306.

²⁹Jamieson, 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 2:26.

³⁰Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 983.

³¹Tom Constable. Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible. Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003. Ec 2:24.