

## 10.

## VIII. HUMAN WISDOM IS VANITY

### Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:10

Another area that Solomon found to be vanity was wisdom. That statement is a shocker, because the interests and characteristic for which Solomon is best known is his wisdom. When Solomon was anointed as king of Israel, Jehovah allowed him to ask for anything he wanted to help him succeed as king. Solomon asked for wisdom, and God was so pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom instead of long life, riches, or the death of his enemies that God gave him wisdom and also promised him riches and honor. Jehovah fulfilled those promises so profusely that Solomon soon became known all over that part of the world as a model for astuteness and sagacity. He demonstrated his penetrating insight into people and his perceptive good judgment through his insightful judicial decisions (1 Kings 3:10-28), his intelligent political appointments (1 Kings 4:1-27), his astonishing literary accomplishments (1 Kings 4:29-34), his monumental construction projects (1 Kings 5:1-7:51), his impressive religious leadership (1 Kings 8:1-9:9, his successful international relationship (1 Kings 10:1-13), and his incredible business successes (1 Kings 10:14-29). His outstanding success in all of those fields made his name a by-word for wisdom that spread over the whole world of that day. They remain to his credit until today. People still are so impressed by Solomon's unequalled understanding and achievements that they immediately declare that Solomon never would and never could have declared that wisdom is vanity.

Admiration of Solomon is so great among people even until today that they spend great energy investigating how Solomon's words in this section of his book are actually words of praise for the value and usefulness of wisdom. When they do so, they not only fail to listen to what Solomon actually said but actually turn his message exactly upside down. Solomon's true message was that all of his good judgment and wise decisions failed him and brought him to disappointment and depression at the end of his days.

The explanation for Solomon's disappointment with his great wisdom is found in his tragic mistake of putting his wisdom and judgment ahead of obedience to God. When God first gave Solomon his legendary wisdom, He told Solomon, :"*If you will walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and My commandments just as David your father walked, then I will lengthen your days*" (1 Kings 3:14). Unfortunately walking in Jehovah's ways and keeping His statutes and commandments is exactly what Solomon did not do. His failure to obey God began when he started depending on treaties with ungodly nations instead of depending on God. In that day, when kings made treaties with each other, they each gave the other one or more women as wives. The idea was that after the gifts, the two kings would belong to the same family and, therefore, would be friendly and live in peace with each other.

However, Solomon's foreign wives, who worshiped false gods, brought with them many unforeseen and unfavorable circumstances. To please his foreign wives and the kings who gave them to him, Solomon felt compelled to build temples for the gods of his foreign wives and then to go with them to worship in those temples (1 Kings 11:1-10). God was so displeased with Solomon's offering offerings in the temples of false gods that He told Solomon He was going to tear his kingdom apart after he died and leave only one tribe to be ruled by his son (1 Kings 11:11-13). Long before Solomon's death, the deterioration of his kingdom began through the rise of both foreign and domestic enemies that Solomon had to cope with through astonishingly ruthless and violent actions (1 Kings 11:14-40). Then when he died, his kingdom split asunder (11:41-24).

A study of Solomon's successes and ultimate failure provides a proper perspective on human wisdom and prepares us to receive his mournful conclusion that human wisdom is just one more vanity. Solomon's wisdom was a generous gift

from God, but it consisted of the ability to make intelligent decisions that produced astonishing success. It did not consist of the ability to always make righteous decisions and to take virtuous actions. The two are not the same. Wisdom is human discernment. Righteousness is divine instruction. A person achieves lasting success only when he puts obedience to God first and only then uses his own best judgment. God explained that reality to Solomon when He agreed to grant Solomon's request for wisdom, but Solomon forgot God's warning and began to trust his own judgment more than he trusted God's commandments. His treaties with foreign kings, his marriages to foreign women, his construction of temples for foreign gods, and his worship in temples of foreign gods all to be seemed necessary and wise actions that promoted good foreign relationships, but

maintaining good relationships with God is far more important and protective than good relationships with foreign nations. God remains faithful. Ungodly foreign rulers do not. In the end, only obedience to God provides safety. One's own good judgment will inevitably fail, but God's word never fails. At the end of his life, Solomon recognized the folly of putting the gift God gave him ahead of the commandments God gave him. When he recognized his mistake, it was too late to save his reign from failure; but at least he recognized his mistake and had the courage to confess it in writing before he died.

Solomon began his confession of the vanity of human wisdom with a penetrating question.

Introduction: *Who [is] like the wise one, and who knows an explanation of a word (8:1a)?*

Solomon's question was double-barreled. Both questions were equivalent to: "Who really knows what wisdom is," and both questions implied a negative answer. His questions implied that no one truly understands what wisdom is or how to practice it.

Solomon's first question ask for someone to did not ask who could point out a person who resembled the wise men. Instead, it challenged his readers to point out just one person who had the qualities and characteristics of a truly wise person. His question anticipated the answer that no one could point out such a person because such a person did not exist.

Solomon's second question contains only four Hebrew words, and two of them are difficult to understand. The first difficult word, which is translated above as "explanation" is difficult because it occurs only once in the whole Old Testament and because it has no related words in the Hebrew language. The second difficult word, which is translated above as "word," is difficult because it is extremely common in the Hebrew language and because it is used with many variant meanings. It literally means "word," but it was used to refer to just about any object or idea the writer was talking about at the time. Therefore, the

second question in this verse has been translated in various ways. KJV, NKJV, RSV, and NRSV translate it as "the interpretation of a thing," NIV and TNIV as "the explanation of things," Douay as "explain things," SGV as "the explanation of a thing," JV as "solve a problem," NEG as "the meaning of anything," and NASB and HCSB as "the interpretation of a matter." True to their freer method of translation, NLT translates it as "to analyze and interpret things" and MSG as "to interpret the meaning of life." All of those interpretations imply the inability of people to understand, but they all refer to a general failure to understand anything. The Hebrew word "word" basically refers to speech or writing. It seems logical and reasonable that in this verse it was referring to the speech and writings of the wise men. Thus the question means, "Who can give an adequate explanation of the meaning of a wise saying or proverb."

Taken together, the two questions mean, "Who can show me one person who resembles a truly wise man, and who can give a truly adequate explanation of a wise saying?" The implication is that no one could. A truly wise person did not exist, and a person who could fully explain a truly wise statement also did not exist. Therefore, explaining true wisdom was impossible.

The same realities are true today. Many wise and learned men and women exist in the world and are recognized as informed and authoritative intellectuals, but not one of them resembles Solomon's expectations of a truly wise person. No matter how much someone may learn, he can never learn everything. Every new discovery only opens his vista to see some additional truth to be explored. Furthermore, new discoveries constantly show flaws and inadequacies in what was considered to be settled fact just a few days prior. Human understanding continues to be tenuous and limited. Since no one can ever know all there is to know, a finished intellectual does not exist. The one who

thinks he has the final answer shows himself to be foolish. He is made foolish by his pride. A wise person can know many things, and it is good for people to learn as much as they can about academic subjects and practical living, but the secret of a happy and successful life lies elsewhere. It is found only in trusting and obeying God. Trusting God is wisdom; trusting human wisdom is vanity.

In explaining the implications of his questions, Solomon began as he had begun his explanation of the vanity of self-righteousness. He quoted proverbs that had been written by Israel's wise men on the subject of wisdom.

### A. PROVERBS ABOUT HUMAN WISDOM (8:1-8)

In his discussion of the vanity of self-righteousness, Solomon had quoted eighteen proverbs about self-righteousness. In this section, he quoted seven proverbs about wisdom. Each proverb is a brief statement of an important principle about wise living, and each is capable of being expanded with many words and thoughts. However, they do not explain what true wisdom is

or how to obtain it. Each will be examined below, not in an effort to exhaust its full meaning, but to try to extract the essence of the truth that is in it. Solomon's purpose in quoting the seven proverbs was to show that they were helpful but inadequate. They and all the other wise sayings of Israel's wise men were not able to explain how to come a truly wise person.

#### 1. *A man's wisdom causes his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed (8:1b).*

This proverb is a positive statement about one of the values of wisdom. Its commendation of wisdom is true and noteworthy, but it is not a guide into how to be a wise person. Like almost all proverbs, it is good and valuable; but it is not a complete or final word about wisdom.

This proverb says that wisdom will show in a person's face. Being able to understand much about life makes a person's eyes brighter, his smile freer, his confidence more obvious, and his attention more focused. It not only adds to the attractiveness of a person's face, it also takes away unbecoming and offensive facial expressions. Harsh sternness that comes from suspicion or hostility toward others is replaced with an open smile, a glad brightness. A person who is unsure of what is wise and right tends to defend himself from some mistake he might make. His expression becomes fixed and hard. His eyes become cold. His lips reflect a frown or a

sneer, and he becomes so preoccupied with his uncertainties that he cannot be responsive to those around him. Possessing understanding of what is wise and right takes away those hard expressions from his face and enables him to show an attractive interest in and concern for the needs of others. Wisdom is more than inner knowledge. It is an outer brightness that shows itself to others.

Because no one can be completely wise does not mean that wisdom has no value. Wisdom is actually a value to be treasured and sought after. However, every person needs to keep it in perspective. Wisdom is good if it is considered for what it is worth, but it is dangerous if it is placed ahead of obeying God's commandments.

The more a person can learn about how to deal with other people wisely and righteously, the more

he becomes pleasant to others in his appearance and in his actions.

2. *I [say], Watch a king's mouth because of a word of oath to God (8:2-4).*
  - a. *Do not be dismayed by his face (8:3a).*
  - b. *Go, do not take a stand over a bad word (8:3b-4),*
    - (1) *Because he does whatever he pleases (8:3c),*
    - (2) *In that a king's word has authority; and who will say to him, "What are you doing?" (8:4)*

This proverb deals with respect for authority. The wise person will follow its advice for his own good and for the good of order and safety in his surroundings. The proverb is wise and good advice, but it is not an answer to the question of how to have wisdom.

This proverb is given in the context of the type of governmental rulership that existed in Solomon's day, when governments were almost completely in the hands of powerful kings. Governmental authority was not divided among legislative, administrative, and judicial branches as it is in America. The king possessed all of those responsibilities within his person. A king was an awesome figure to be feared by one and all. What was the wise way to deal with such an all-powerful figure? Should a person resent his authority and resist his demands? Solomon said wisdom would lead a person to obey the king.

The proverb begins with a command to "watch a king's mouth." The command means that a person should observe carefully what comes out of a king's mouth, so that he will understand the king's commands and so that he will obey those commands faithfully. The proverb gives the reason a person should obey the king. It is because of the person's oath or commitment to God. A person should obey the king for his own sake, to fulfill his own commitment to respect properly constituted authority. Obedience to the king involved a much higher loyalty than respect for law. God instituted governmental authority when Noah and his family came off of the ark. From that time on, obeying that authority was an obligation to God. When a person promised to obey God, his promise included an obligation to obey the law of the king.

The proverb counsels a person not to be dismayed by the face of the king. It is talking about

when a person is faced with the king or with one of his commands. That counsel could mean that a person should not be afraid of the king. More likely, it means a person should not be deterred from obeying the king because of his attitude toward the king. A similar use of the word "to dismay" is found in Isaiah 21:3, where a frightened person says, "I am dismayed from seeing." He meant he was so distressed he could not see. This proverb literally says, "Do not be dismayed from his face." It means a wise person should not be so distressed about the king's command that he refuses to obey it.

That understanding is supported by the next sentence, which advised a person not to stand up against the king because of something bad he had commanded. The reason for not opposing the king was that the king did as he pleased. His will was supreme, and a wise person would not oppose it. The king had power and authority, and a sensible person would not dare challenge him about what he was doing. The proper attitude toward a king was respect and obedience, not resistance.

In Solomon's day the king was the only authority that brought law and order to society and protection to individuals. Without an authority to bring order and protection into society, life becomes a jungle and daily life chaos. Therefore, in the day in which Solomon lived the wise person was obligated to respect the authority of the king and obey his commands. Even if a person did not like one of the decisions of the king, he would be exposed to much worse tyranny without the protection the king provided. He should not disobey the king because of one bad decision. Even when the king made a mistake, a wise person still would respect and obey his authority..

America has no king, and in America governmental authority is limited by national and state constitutions. Also power is divided among three governmental branches and numerous regulating agencies. It is still possible for abuse and oppression to occur, but crime and violence are much better controlled with the institutions of democracy than they would be without those authorities. In free lands like America, even more than in a dictatorship, wisdom dictates that people obey governmental authority. A citizen may dislike some government leaders and some governmental regulations, but all citizens would be much worse off if no governmental authority existed. The wise person obeys the law unless it directly conflicts with a clear command from God

Disagreement with some bad decision of an official does not free a person to disrespect his authority. He is in authority, and all of society would be in disarray if the governing authority did not exist. In America, citizens have the ability to replace a bad ruler by voting. That method is orderly and prevents violent rebellion and chaos. The process is slow but orderly. While democratic procedures are in process, a person has the

### **3. *One obeying a command will not know a bad word (8:5a).***

This proverb gives another reason for obeying commands given by those in authority. The person who obeys will not be scolded, reprimanded, or rebuked. That assurance is good counsel, but it is limited because it reveals only one good result of obedience out of many. It deals with one wise action, but not with wisdom itself.

This proverb counsels that a person who obeys the law does not have to face the disagreeable experience of being reprimanded or punished. A word of rebuke is a bad word to the one who receives it. A person can avoid that unpleasant experience by obeying the persons and the laws that have authority over him. No one likes to be corrected, especially not by an authority who has the power to punish him. To avoid that irksome event, a person should obey the law. He may not like every command that is given to him, but resisting the command will bring consequences he will like even less.

obligation to obey the law and the decisions of the authorities. That obligation applies to policemen, tax assessors, game wardens, regulatory agents and all other government officials.

Paul gave the same advice in Romans 13:1-2, ***“Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves”*** (HCSB). He gave the same advice again in 2 Timothy 2:1-2, ***“First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity”*** (HCSB).

This proverb, like all divinely inspired proverbs that are in the Bible, is more than good advice. It is a command from God. However, it is not a stamp of approval on the wisdom of all intellectuals, nor is it a guarantee that all the statements of a wise man will always be right.

Paul elaborated on that point in the passage quoted above when he said, ***“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do good and you will have its approval. For government is God’s servant to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath to the one who does wrong.”*** (Rom. 13:3-4, HCSB).

This same principle applies to other types of authority besides government. The authority of a teacher or tutor should be respected, as well as the authority of a parent or guardian or the authority of an employer or supervisor. If a person must disagree with any of those authorities, he should do so kindly and respectfully. If he complies with any such authority, he should do so willingly and cheerfully. By exercising that kind of wisdom, he

can avoid the unpleasantness of a harsh word of reprimand.

**4. *The heart of a wise one knows both a time and a decision (8:5b).***

Solomon probably chose this proverb to complement the previous two. It says a wise person knows when and how to speak and act. It certainly applies to dealing with a king or other governmental officer, but it also can have a broader application. Wisdom enables a person to know what to say and how to act in any situation. The proverb says that a wise person knows how to deal with questions and problems, but it does not deal with how to become a person who has that kind of wisdom.

The point of the proverb is that, when a person faces a problem or seeks assistance, he should choose the right time and method for dealing with it. The word translated “decision” actually means “judgment.” It generally was used to refer to the decisions of a judge in a law court, but in this proverb it refers to a person’s judgment concerning his own actions. It means that a person should give thought to how best to approach a problem, and he should act only after he has made a careful decision.

Sometimes a person might need to make an appeal to a king or might have to deal with some critical situation or crisis. In such cases, it is important that the person face the situation with care and good reason. The foolish person will be impulsive and demanding. The wise person will deal with the situation in a way that will not arouse resentment or anger but that will tend to elicit a

positive response. The wise person will invest thought and prayer into deciding how to proceed. As a result he will arrive at a decision about the time and the approach he should use in dealing with the problem. By doing so, his chances of success will be much improved.

Timing also is important in dealing with a critical situation. The person needs to take action at the most advantageous time possible. If he is making an appeal to an official, he needs to make his appeal when the official is not pressured with other worries and when the official has time to consider the merits of the appeal. The wise person will wait until the time is right to ask for assistance.

Using the right approach is equally important when seeking to settle a dispute or convince a person of a certain position. The wise person will consider the manner he will use in presenting his case. He will learn as much as possible about the person with whom he is dealing, so he will know what pleases him. By using that method, he will most likely receive approval or agreement.

Recognizing the right time and the right method in dealing with any problem is a mark of a wise person, but it is not a final word about wisdom.

**5. *For every desire there is a time and decision, even when a man’s misery [is] great upon him (8:6-7).***

- a. *Because he does not know what will come to be (8:7a).***
- b. *And who will tell him what it will come to be (8:7b)?***

The lesson of this proverb is similar to the previous one. It teaches that for everything a person desires there is an appropriate time and way for him to go about getting it. The weakness of the proverb is that it does not tell a person how to recognize the appropriate time or how to make the right decision about the appropriate approach to take.

The word translated “desire” refers to something that pleases a person. It can be translated “every pleasure” or “every delight” or “every longing.” Any of those meanings make sense in this verse. Whatever the exact meaning of the word, the point is that there is an appropriate time to act and an appropriate decision to make for obtaining whatever a person desires. A person should not insist on receiving what he desires before the time is right.

Also he should not insist on coping with a delicate matter before he has made a careful decision about the method he should use in dealing with it. The proverb emphasizes that a person should consider the right time and method for everything he seeks to do or for every desirable thing he seeks to gain.

The proverb says that the reason a person should be wise enough to choose the right time and method is because he cannot know in advance what the outcome will be. No one can tell him ahead of time what response he will receive. Therefore, he should wait to deal with his problem until the time is right and use the method that is most favorable for him to receive the response he desires.

A foolish person will rush into a problem situation and demand an immediate solution. His impatience will arouse resentment and probably anger. He will not find a satisfactory solution. A wise person will be more patient. He will wait until the other person has time to hear his appeal or his

offer without haste or pressure. He also will seek to approach the other person in a place where he is not distracted with other worries or concerns and is able to give attention to the matter at hand. And he will use a method that most appeals to the person he is approaching.

Sometimes it is difficult to wait for the right time and place before approaching a problem or disagreement. The person seeking a solution will usually feel great pressure to settle the matter as soon as possible. It may trouble him greatly that he has to wait to try to solve the problem that is weighing on his mind and heart. In spite of whatever inner pressure he might feel, if he is wise he will control himself and wait to bring up his concern when the time and place are right. His wisdom will help him know that finding the right solution in the right way at the right time is more important than demanding to deal with the situation prematurely or haphazardly.

- 6. *No man has control over the wind to restrain the wind (8:8),***  
***a. And there is no control over the day of death (8:8)***  
***b. And [one does not escape] control in battle (8:8b),***  
***c. And wickedness will not let escape ones [who are] into it (8:8c).***

This proverb is a warning that some events are beyond the control of any person. No one can change them, so a person must accept them and deal with them as they exist. Recognizing that reality takes a lot of pressure off of a person who thinks he must be in charge of everything. However, the proverb gives no advice about how to gain the ability to adjust to situations a person cannot control.

The proverb offers the wind as an example of something no one can control. Many have tried. All have failed. Some have tried to control the wind and the rain with dances. Others have tried to bring rain or to calm hurricanes with ice crystals dropped from air planes. One has had just as much effect as the other, which is no effect. The best a person can do is to seek shelter when a tornado is approaching, to seek a source of water when a dry wind brings drought, and to flee to high ground when a wind off of the sea blows in a torrential downfall. The wise person makes advance

preparation for times of drought, flood, cold, and heat, because he knows he cannot control them. He adjusts himself to weather changes instead of trying to make the weather adjust to him.

This proverb names some other events that are beyond the control of any man. One example is that no one can control the day of his death. Today some foolish people try to control their deaths by suicide or assisted suicide. Others try to control the death of someone else by murder. They may succeed in shortening their own or another person's days on earth, but they will be shocked when they learn that the people whom they helped to die or whom they killed did not really die. Instead they live on in another place, and he also will go to a place where he will have to give account to God for trying to take into his hands matters that belong only to God. The wise person makes no effort to control the day of his death, but instead prepares for it by trusting Jesus as his Savior and living according to Jesus' commands.

Another example of a situation which no one can control is when soldiers go into battle. They can only do their best to defeat the enemy, but the best preparation and the best tactics cannot guarantee victory. Along with making preparation for victory, wise fighting units make preparation for an orderly retreat if it becomes necessary. They need to make those preparations because no one has control over what happens in battle and because no one can guarantee its outcome.

Most importantly, no one can avoid the consequences of his sins. Wickedness will not release anyone who has come under its control. In addition, God has promised that He will in no wise excuse the guilty. He will forgive the one who

repents, but He will not excuse anyone who hardens his heart and refuses to obey God. The Bible says all have sinned. It also says no man can work his way out of his sins or escape their consequences. Only God can give him a way out.

These examples are only some of the events over which no one has control. Since people have no control over so many happenings in life, no one can be wise enough to have the solution to every problem or the answer to every question that might arise. Events that are beyond the control of everybody deny to everyone the ability to be truly wise.

## **B. SOLOMON'S REASONS FOR CONCLUDING THAT HUMAN WISDOM IS VANITY (8:9-9:10)**

**Introduction:** *I observed all this while giving my mind to every deed that is done under the sun (8:9).*

Solomon said he examined all of the advice given in the proverbs he quoted. Clearly he had examined many other similar proverbs as well. Not only did he study them, he also compared them with life that was occurring around him, to see how the advice of the wise men worked out when it was put into practice. He wanted to see how practical the wisdom of the wise men was when applied to real life.

The result was that he saw many events in the lives of people that the wisdom of the wise men could not explain. Solomon proceeded immediately to cite some of the situations he saw in people's lives for which the proverbs of the wise men provided no answer.

### **1. A time when the man has control over a man [and does] according to evil to him (8:9b).**

One of the situations in life for which human wisdom had no solution was oppression of one person by another. Solomon saw people being hurt by other people who had power or authority over them. The wisest of men had not found a way to escape when a powerful oppressor was determined to harm him, and no human wisdom had been able to discover a way to avoid or eradicate oppression from the earth. The wisdom of men just did not provide a way for people to deal with evil oppressors.

Nations have fought wars through the ages to defeat oppressors, and America is still fighting wars to oppose oppression; yet every time one oppressor is eliminated, two more arise. Oppressive men and

oppressive nations are examples of situations where wisdom is insufficient to find a solution. The pervasiveness of oppression in the world is just one example of the vanity of human wisdom.

In the light of God's revealed truth, believers can say with confidence that injustices will be made right on Judgment Day when God gives punishment or reward to every person according to the way he handled his problems and challenges in life. But human wisdom did not discover the truth that Judgment Day is coming. It is known only because God has revealed it. Knowledge of the way God will bring justice to all men in the great Judgment Day is beyond discovery by the wisdom and insights of men. God has the answer, but human



wisdom does not. God reveals the answer through divine inspiration when He is ready, but human wisdom can never discover it.

- 2. *And then I saw wicked ones buried (8:10),***
  - a. And they went in and came out of the holy place (8:10b),***
  - b. And what they had done in the city was dropped. This also is futility (8:10c).***

Another situation for which human wisdom has no adequate explanation or solution is when wicked men die and are given great praise at their funerals, while their evil deeds are passed over and never mentioned. It was customary in that day, as it is today, to give praise to men during their funerals, no matter how unworthily they had lived or how severely they had harmed others. It made their families feel good, and it took the edge off of the sorrow that some felt over their deaths. However, the praise often was dishonest and deceptive.

Solomon saw it happen often that a cruel and evil man was taken to the temple for his funeral service and was honored as if he were the most loyal of God's worshipers, while all the crooked deals he made in the city were never mentioned. The wise men had no counsel about how to avoid such dishonesty or what to do about it when it occurred.

- 3. *Because a sentence for an evil deed is not carried out speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is full of desire to do evil (8:11).***

Another situation that troubled Solomon for which wisdom provided no solution was justice delayed. One person should have been tried and sentenced long ago, but his defenders kept finding loopholes that postponed his trial and allowed him to be free in the meantime. Another person should have been kept in prison for his crimes, but he kept finding ways to be released. Still another person should have been executed long ago for his heinous crimes, but prosecutors kept finding excuses to put off his execution and he continued to be confined but allowed to live in relative comfort. Failure to conduct a timely trial or to execute a timely sentence of some caused resentment on the part of persons who were brought to justice promptly and disrespect for the law on the part of others.

Today we should not be too critical of that ancient practice, because it still happens every day at the funerals of evil men. What preacher dares to tell the truth at a funeral about the life of a drunkard, a wife abuser, an overbearing employer, or an oppressive lender? Everyone feels disdain for the person who delivers a funeral eulogy for a vicious unbeliever and "preaches him into heaven," but it happens every day. And it is vanity to think anyone can stop it from happening again the next time an evil man dies.

God will reveal the truth about each man's life on the Judgment Day, but no man is wise enough to know how to change dishonest praise in daily life today. Because wise men cannot change that unpleasant practice, wisdom is vanity.

Solomon observed that human wisdom had found no way to avoid those kinds of inequities, and he concluded that failure to correct that problem proved the inadequacy and vanity of human wisdom.

The same problems exist today in enforcing the law. Suspension of penalties, probation, and parole are techniques that are used to give people an opportunity to make a new start and to correct their ways, but all too often they become excuses for a person to continue his wrongdoing. No human wisdom can tell when placing a person on probation or parole will help him correct his ways and when it will increase his incentive to do wrong. The best judgment of judges often proves to be wrong, no matter how they decide to handle a case. In spite of all the advances in law enforcement and in spite of

all of the sincere efforts to improve the dispensing of justice, the problem of unfair and unequal enforcement of the law is as great a problem today

as it was in Solomon's day. It remains as a testimony to the vanity of human wisdom.

4. *Because a sinner keeps doing evil a hundred times and keeps prolonging his life (8:12-13),*
  - a. *Even though I know it will be well with the ones fearing God because they fear before His face (8:12b).*
  - b. *And it will not be well with the wicked one (8:13),*
    - (1) *Neither will he prolong his days like a shadow (8:13b),*
    - (2) *Because he does not fear before the face of God (8:13c).*

Another situation for which Solomon found no solution in human wisdom was when a person did wrong over and over again and kept getting away with his wrongdoing. He saw some people openly disobeying the law but never arrested or tried because of friendship or favoritism toward them on the part of officials. He also saw others found guilty of a crime but only warned and released. Whether the person escaped paying for his evil deeds through bribery of a judge, through pleading a technicality, or through corruption of the courts, his trial or sentencing was delayed over and over again, while he continued his illegal or unjust activities. Through those means and through many other unjust maneuvers, unscrupulous men were able to lengthen their evil lives like a shadow lengthens as the sun drops lower in the sky in the evening.

Solomon saw that as a result of such injustices many guilty persons concluded that the law would not ever punish them but would always allow them to get away with their evil deeds. Therefore, they had no incentive to correct their ways; and they continued to do harm to others and to themselves. Solomon also saw that the proverbs of the wise men provided no guidance to let officials know when to be lenient or merciful and when to be harsh. Their best wisdom often proved to be mistaken, and their actions produced more harm than good, proving that human wisdom was vanity.

The same situations exist in enforcing the law today. Overcrowded jails cause some to be released long before they complete their sentences. Youths commit vicious deeds but because of their age are

only warned and allowed to continue unrestrained. Some are found guilty but have their sentences suspended without probation, and they are left without restraint to return to their evil ways. Sometimes people are allowed to go unpunished out of good intentions, but all too often it results in disrespect for the law on the part of many. People see the guilty go unpunished, and they conclude they also will always be treated with mercy and they will never have to pay for what they do. What is intended to inspire people to do better often turns out to provide an excuse for the person to continue in wrong doing or even to increase the brazenness and fierceness with which he or she breaks the law.

Solomon said he knew the one who feared and obeyed God was going to be blessed and the one who was wicked was going to suffer for his wrongdoing. However, when he looked at the way law enforcement and justice worked, he could not see how and when justice ever was going to be accomplished. His confidence that justice was going to be done in the end was not based on human wisdom or understanding, but on faith. By human wisdom he could find no way to explain how justice eventually would be done. He just had to believe and wait. He trusted in God, because human wisdom could not give him an answer. Neither had he ever found a wise man who could show him how to avoid such injustices. The failure of human wisdom to find a solution to such unjust situations made him know that human wisdom was inadequate to deal with evil in the heart and lives of people; therefore, it was vanity.

- 5. *There is a vanity that is done on the earth when there are righteous ones to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked (8:14).***
- a. *And there are wicked ones to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous ones(8:14b).***
- b. *I said that this also is vanity (8:14c).***

Another situation for which human wisdom could not provide Solomon with an explanation was when good men suffered and evil men lived in ease and plenty. Solomon saw one woman who served God faithfully all her adult life afflicted with crippling pain, while her neighbor drank heavily, took God's name in vain, and lied as a regular habit but never had even one painful joint or headache. A man who was faithful in giving to God and generous in sharing with those in need suffered a great financial loss and lived in poverty while his dishonest neighbor succeeded in every business venture he attempted and lived in luxury. A young couple who loved people and set a good example in every area of their lives were not able to have children, while another couple a block away had five children and introduced them to every vice known. Solomon realized that the world is full of inequities and injustices which no one had power to change. It made him know that human wisdom was helpless in such situations; and, therefore, it was vanity.

The same situations exist all over the world today. Civilization has achieved great advances in providing freedom and opportunity for all, but no one has ever been able to change the reality that many good people suffer and many evil people thrive. People write books to tell others how to accept and cope with such situations, but until today no insight has ever been offered to prevent those

incongruous situations from occurring. To human wisdom those situations are still an unsolved riddle.

In His Word, God has revealed an explanation for such unjust situation. He has made known the existence of spiritual warfare between God and Satan, which explains how many good people are wounded in the midst of the battle and how many evil people are protected by unseen evil forces. He also has given a firm promise that someday the warfare will be over and that in the end God and righteousness will win and justice will be dispensed to all. But human insight has no way to discover or prove the reality of spiritual warfare, and for certain it has no way to predict its ultimate end. Human wisdom just remains puzzled, without providing any answer or explanation of why good men so often suffer while evil men often live their whole live with praise and plenty.

People who only know what human wisdom can see and explain about such situations become confused and bitter. They often become rebellious and violent, because they do not know how else to respond. Only faith in God and His ultimate triumph over evil can enable a person to live with life's injustices with calmness and confidence. A satisfactory answer to such situations cannot be found through human wisdom. Trying to find the answer through human reason and insight proves to be vanity.

6. *[Because man cannot know everything that is done under the sun] (8:15-9:1)*
  - a. *So I praise happiness (8:15),*
    - (1) *Because nothing good comes to a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be happy (8:15b),*
    - (1) *For this will accompany him in his labor [throughout] the days of his life that God gives to him under the sun (8:15c).*
  - b. *Because I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the activity that is done on the earth both in daytime and in nighttime when one does not see sleep with his eyes (8:16-17,*
    - (1) *And I saw all the work of God (8:17a),*
    - (2) *[And I saw] that man is not able to find out the doing that is done under the sun (8:17b-17d).*
      - (a) *In that the man may labor to seek it, but he will not find it (8:17c).*
      - (b) *Even though the wise one may claim to know [it], he is not able to find [it] (8:17d).*
  - (3) *So I put all this on my heart to clarify all this (9:1)*
    - (a) *That the righteous and the wise and their doings [are] in God's hand (9:1b).*
    - (b) *Whether love or hate, man does not know everything [that is] before their faces (9:1c).*

Solomon cited a sixth situation for which human wisdom had no solution. That situation was that it was impossible for any person to know everything that takes place under the sun. Since no one can know everything, no one has the answer to the riddle of life.

Solomon gave advice about how to deal with that impossibility by saying that the only good way to approach life was just to enjoy life like it is. He said he praised being happy with what a person has, because nothing really good comes to a person except having enough to eat and drink and to be happy with it. He said that, if a person could learn to be content with having enough to meet his daily needs without fretting to have an excess he could not use, he would have a contentment that would stay with him through all of his labor and struggles. It will not take his struggles away, but it will enable him to be happy in spite of them.

Then Solomon explained the reason he gave that advice. He said it was because he had sought to study life all over the earth in order to make some sense out of it, and he had concluded that the search was impossible. He said he had attempted to see all the activity that is done under the sun, in the daytime and in the nighttime. What he saw was God at work but people unable to see and learn everything that took place all over the world. No matter how much he worked to try to learn everything, he could not do it. He said he had

sought earnestly to know and understand life all over the world and had studied with great diligence the way the world works and the way people work in the world. He had pursued his search day and night and had pondered over it so persistently that many a night he could not sleep at all.

Solomon said some men thought they had all the answers to life's questions and claimed they could give those answers to others. But truthfully, they did not have all the answers. No matter how insightful they were or how diligently they sought for understanding, they were left with many gaps in their knowledge. When people tried to follow their advice, they found too many situations where the wise man's instructions just did not fit or did not apply.

Now after all of his searching and after all of his observance of the searches of others, Solomon was ready to share his conclusion. He concluded that it was impossible for any person to understand all about life in this world or to explain all that takes place in it. People's inability to see the whole picture proved that human wisdom was vanity.

Faced with that reality, Solomon said he had it in his heart to clarify the truth that all people and everything people do in life are in God's hand. Many people think they are in control of their lives. They are not. God has ultimate control of a person's life, whether he is righteous or wicked. No

one can know what is coming to his life, because no one controls his life. No one knows whether love or hate is coming to him or her, because no one can know everything. Many situations exist that the wisest of men cannot explain, and there are some questions the most insightful of men cannot answer. The search for wisdom turns out to be vanity, because no person is capable of learning enough to be able to control even his own life. Therefore, the person who thinks he can control what will happen to him is playing games with vanity.

The present day is called “The Information Age.” Some claim that more discoveries have been made in the present generation than in all previous generation combined. Even if that statement is an exaggeration, the storehouse of knowledge that has been gathered in the libraries and museums of the world and the extent of the information that is contained in the minds of men and women around the world is staggering. In addition, the vast reservoir of knowledge that is known today is more easily available to everyone than ever before. A few strokes on a computer that is connected to the internet can call up information that would have taken months to uncover only a few years ago. A few swipes on an i-phone can enable a person not only to hear the latest information about a friend on

the other side of the world but also to see him or her at the same time. Yet all that knowledge has only uncovered how much people do not know. From the vast expanse of space to the tiny minuteness of sub-particles of the atom, a vast world of knowledge remains an unsolved mystery. The great increase in knowledge and learning has only made people aware of how much remains to be learned. Today more than ever, we know that people have only scratched the surface of the great wealth of knowledge that remains to be explored. No one person and all persons together do not know enough to consider any person to be truly wise. The world contains no true gurus, and the wisest of men are limited in what they know and understand. People today are forced to conclude with Solomon that, since people can never learn everything, it is impossible for anyone to be truly wise.

Solomon was not ready to say it yet, but the only solution to man’s lack of knowledge and wisdom is to trust God, because the outcome of it all is in His hand. At this point, Solomon is preparing people to receive that declaration at the end of his book by emphasizing that wisdom is another one of mankind’s interest that turns out to be vanity.

**7. *All [happens] just the same as to all [others] (9:2-10),***

**a. *One event comes: (9:2b-2):***

**(1) *To the righteous and to the wicked (9:2c),***

**(2) *To the good and to the bad (9:2d),***

**(3) *To the clean and to the unclean (9:2e),***

**(4) *To the one offering a slaughter-offering and to the one not offering a slaughter-offering (9:2f),***

**(5) *As the good one, the same as sinner (9:2g),***

**(6) *The one making a vow, the same as the one fearing a vow (9:2h).***

**b. *This is a bad thing that in all that is done under the sun one event [comes] to all (9:3).***

**(1) *Because the heart of the sons of man is full of evil, and craziness [is] in their heart***

**(2) *During their lives and in the dying ones’ last [days] (9:3c).***

**c. *For whoever is chosen [to be] among all the living, there is opportunity (9:4-6)?***

**(1) *For a living dog is better than the dead lion (9:4b).***

**(2) *For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything (9:5-6).***

**(a) *And they have no more reward because their remembrance is forgotten (9:5b).***

**(b) *Their love and their hate and their envy already have perished (9:6a),***

**(c) *And they no longer have a part in all that is done under the sun (9:6b).***

- (3) *Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, because God already is pleased with your doings (9:7-10).***
  - (a) *Always let your clothes be white, and do not let oil be lacking on your head (9:8).***
  - (b) *Enjoy life with the wife whom you love during all of the days of your breathing that He has given to you under the sun (9:9).***
    - (a) *Because [during] all the days of your breathing, that is your portion in life (9:9b),***
    - (b) *And in your labor at which you labor under the sun (9:9c).***
- (4) *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your strength (9:10),***
  - (a) *Because [there is] no doing or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol (9:10b)***
  - (b) *Where you are going (9:10c).***

Solomon came to a seventh and final situation for which wisdom has no answer. That situation is that death comes alike to everyone. No person can avoid it, no matter who he is or where he lives. No amount of wise learning or righteous deeds can change it. Since no one knows enough to conquer death, no man can consider himself to be truly wise. Death was another situation that proved the inadequacy and vanity of human wisdom.

To stress that he meant death was going to come to everyone, he stated in six different ways that the surety of death included the righteous and the wicked. He described the righteous and the wicked as the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, the worshiper and the non-worshiper, the good person and the sinner, and the one making commitments to God and the one not making commitments. All of those designations applied to the same two groups, and those two groups included every person in the world. Everyone fits into one of those categories or the other. By the righteous he did not mean people who are totally good, because he had already spent considerable time insisting that no one is completely righteous. He meant people who are righteous through faith in God and through worshiping Him with offerings and vows. By the wicked he meant those who did not trust God and did not worship Him. Everyone in the world fitted into one of those categories or the other. Therefore, Solomon was stressing that the most sincere of believers and the most wicked of sinners all faced alike the reality of death. Regardless of all the differences among those who were righteous and those who were wicked, they all shared one common event. All of them were going to die.

Solomon considered it to be a bad or sad thing that the one event of death comes to all people, but

he recognized that it was a reality. The reason death comes to all people is that the hearts of all people are full of evil and craziness. Even those who are righteous through faith in God still have sinful inclinations within them. The best of people are not fully good and have to face death because of their sins. Since no one is good enough to escape death, no one can be truly wise.

In the light of that reality Solomon encouraged people to realize that their only opportunity to make a mark on this world was while they were alive. When they died, it would be too late to achieve any more accomplishments on the earth. He said a living dog can accomplish much more than a dead lion, even though a lion is much bigger and stronger than a dog. No matter how strong a lion is, it cannot accomplish anything when he is dead. He pointed out that the same is true of people. When death comes, people's opportunity to accomplish anything else on earth is gone. As far as life on this earth is concerned, their bodies do not know anything, and they certainly do not have any more opportunities for praise or reward for what they accomplish. In fact, not only their ability to act is gone, but even their remembrance is forgotten.

By those statements, Solomon was not denying that life exists after death. He meant the same thing people mean today when they say we must work for God while we live, because we will be judged for what we do while we are alive in the body. After death, no more opportunity exists to change our record. While living on the earth, people have opportunities to work and do good, to love or to hate or to be envious; but when they die, their opportunity to make any other contribution to this world is ended.

Because death is sure, Solomon encouraged people to make the most of life while they have it. He encouraged people to do the things that make one's personal life enjoyable. He said, "Stay clean and neat. Enjoy sharing life with the wife God has given you. Whatever kind of work you do, do it well." He meant people should not neglect their opportunities to do those basic essentials to life, because every person's opportunity to do any of them ends when he dies.

Solomon said that when people die, they go to Sheol. Obviously, he understood Sheol as a place where people go after they die. Not a lot of explanation is given in the Old Testament about Sheol. Some say it means the grave, but Solomon's statement sounds more like he understood it to be a place where people will be conscious and active. Some say Sheol was considered by believers in Old Testament times to be a place where people have a shadowy, dreary existence. It is better to think that the knowledge people had about Sheol in Solomon's day was shadowy because God had not yet revealed a great deal about it. At least this much is revealed in Solomon's brief statement about Sheol in this verse: (1) It is a place. (2) It is a place where people go after death. (3) It is a place where both righteous and unrighteous people go. It may be assumed that righteous people and unrighteous people are in different sections of Sheol, but it is a place that includes an abode for both. Solomon's statement leaves one aspect of Sheol open to question. Did Solomon mean that people in Sheol

are unconscious and unable to think or do anything? Probably not. The point he was stressing was that people only have an opportunity to influence this world while they are alive. When he said, ". . . ***[there is] no doing or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol,***" he probably meant people cannot do any of those things to influence life on the earth when they are in Sheol. If that was what Solomon meant, he was not making any statement about what life is like in Sheol. He was making a declaration that, when people are in Sheol, their opportunities to influence life on this earth are over.

Hebrews 9:27 says the same thing, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (HCSB). In the light of other New Testament revelations, that statement clearly does not mean that after death the only thing people can experience is judgment. It means that with regard to people's relationship to this world, the only activity that remains to them is to be judged for what they did here. Solomon meant the same thing.

Solomon's emphasis was that death is coming for all men, whether they are wise or foolish. All of the wisdom and knowledge a man can collect will not change that fact one iota. Therefore, in the light of universal death, wisdom is vanity. Human wisdom is good, and it should be sought with all earnestness; but as far as being a final answer to the meaning of life, it is just another vanity.