

THE DILEMMA OF A WISE MAN

Study 1

Forgotten Wisdom



**Ecclesiastes 9: 13-18;
1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**

There is something good about the parable that we read in **Ecclesiastes 9**. Notice that it is wisdom under the sun that has caught the preacher's eye. Can you imagine the situation? A small city with a small population. There comes a time when it is besieged by the armies of a great king. No escape seems possible. In the days of the Kings of Israel this was quite a common occurrence. As counsel was taken as to what to do to save the city from its doom there is found a poor wise man. His poverty made him insignificant, but his wisdom made him great. Through his strategy the city was saved. How much honour and gratitude he deserved for his wise counsel. The great relief which the people must have felt should have made them very grateful. Yet, **"no one remembered that same poor man."** He was quietly forgotten and found no place in the rejoicings of victory. Wisdom is better than strength - than weapons of war. Wisdom proved itself in providing deliverance at the time of desperate need. Yet look again at the picture - the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

It is very interesting to study the place that wisdom has in the Ideas of the writers of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament. A good example of this is **Proverbs 1: 20-33**. If you have time to read this passage carefully, you will find that wisdom is likened to a herald, calling for acceptance. It has much to offer for the good of those to whom it calls. But if it is refused and rejected, it tells of a penalty for such rejection of its counsel. **Verse 33** shows how security and calm come from listening to wisdom's voice.

Think first of all of Wisdom's Design.

Behind the scenes we can imagine the poor wise man of the city making his plan for its salvation. He would weigh up the strength and strategy of the enemy. Against this he would gauge the resources of the besieged city and work out his plan of victory. There is a good picture in this story of the power of Satan over the lives of men. He is the enemy of man's soul, seeking every strategy to work destruction. Genesis tells how he began this dreadful warfare designed to destroy. All the sin in the lives of each one of us tells the story of Satan's power. **1 John 3: 8** tells us that the Lord Jesus came to destroy the works of the Devil. Like the man of our story, He became poor, yet He came with a plan to save our lives from sin and Satan. Remember that God's wisdom planned to destroy Satan's power over our lives. In **1 Corinthians 1: 24** the Lord Jesus is called the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Then think of Wisdom's Deliverance.

Through the wisdom of the poor wise man, the city was delivered. We can imagine him again, presenting his plan

to the rulers of the city. Through the adoption of the plan the enemy was eventually overthrown and great deliverance was brought. This is a wonderful picture of what Christ has accomplished through His mighty power. **1 Corinthians 1: 18** tells us that **"the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,** (that is, those who are held in Satan's power) **but to those who are being saved it is the power of God"**. The Lord Jesus was a very poor man when He died on the Cross. He was so poor, even without friends and possessions. He ultimately gave His very life for our salvation. This was His wise plan for the deliverance of our lives from the stranglehold of sin and Satan. Yet to many today the great plan of man's salvation is reckoned as utter foolishness. How wonderful when we understand the wisdom of it.

Finally, think of Wisdom Despised.

"No one remembered that same poor man". The preacher seems baffled by such ingratitude. Think just here of the way in which Christ is treated by those who reject the message of the Gospel. **"Wisdom is better than weapons of war"**. **(9: 18)** Notice this statement as the foolishness of these people is exposed. **1 Corinthians 1: 18-25** makes very clear God's salvation reveals His wisdom, yet His wisdom is foolishness to a world which rejects Christ. It is very sad that the Lord Jesus is despised and rejected although He is the only way of salvation. As He hung on the Cross, men mocked and scorned Him. They have been doing this ever since. Yet He is the only One who can deliver from the power of sin and Satan. The proof of this is seen in the fact that He rose from the dead and is alive today.

As you close this study read again **1 Corinthians 1**. Corinth was the centre of worldly wisdom. Paul was conscious of this as he wrote this letter. Philosophers and wise men gathered there to engage in their disputes and discussions. Notice Paul's challenge in **verse 20**. **"Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"** All its boasted learning did not lead to the knowledge of God or of the salvation found in Christ.

Paul states that God has even chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. When you put the parable of the poor wise man behind these statements it becomes very relevant. Yet Christ is the wisdom of God and He is made unto us wisdom. If you read on into **chapter 2** you will find out what this wisdom means and where it leads us. It is a wonderful study. What the writer of Ecclesiastes seemed to be groping after - the pursuit of wisdom - the Christian finds in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, **1 Corinthians 2: 9-13**. Think about this carefully.

Study 2

Wasted Labour?

Read Ecclesiastes 2: 18-23; 9: 7-12;
12: 11-14; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-15

There are many things that perhaps puzzle you in the story which the experience of the preacher tells. Sometimes, he seems to reason in circles without reaching any definite conclusion. But one thing I feel is certain about him - he was not afraid of hard work. The very atmosphere of the record of his search for life and satisfaction suggests tireless energy. Turning back to **chapter 2** again, we see how much he was prepared to do to gain his end. He certainly did not sit down and wait for it to come to him. He said he made great works, he built and planted and gathered together his treasures. He studied too in his search for wisdom, maybe growing weary with his hours of study.

I think you will agree with me that one subject upon which he was well qualified to speak with understanding was that of labour. Many people can tell you all about work, and how it should be done, but when it comes to doing and working hard, they are sadly lacking. The sad thing about the thoughts of the preacher on work seems to be that after putting so much energy into his labour, he judges it all as being unfruitful and lacking in reward.

Let us look together at some of the things he says. He begins by asking a question in **chapter 1: 3**, "**What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun?**" He states quite clearly the fact that if a man works he should expect some return for his labour. It is obvious, also, that labour should bring enjoyment, as well as being profitable. One thing is certain - God never condones laziness. We live in a day when many people want as much as possible for doing as little as they can. This is at the root of so much industrial strife and disorder. Christians should never be lazy people. But look at the sad reflection of the preacher regarding his work in **chapter 2: 11**. He looked at all that he had done - his energy and skill - and all was empty and without profit. What a waste of time!

As we notice this, perhaps we can consider three points about our work.

1. It is possible to waste our time and energy.

God does not want Christians to waste the time that He gives them. Remember this, that God gives us abilities and time also in which to use them. The Lord Jesus told several parables which illustrate this point. **Luke 19: 11-27** is a very good example. If you read it through, you will notice that after the Nobleman had entrusted the pounds to the men who were his servants, he gave them this message, "**Do business till I come.**" (**verse 13**) He expected them to use their time in his work. I always wonder, you know, what the man who buried his pound did with his time. As far as his master was concerned, it was wasted. To waste time is to fail to use something precious which God has given to us. Opportunity is a fine thing, but it can so easily be lost. **Ephesians 5: 16** speaks of "**redeeming the time, because the days are evil**". Someone has put this as buying up the opportunities. Satan will steal our time if he can.

2. It is possible to work well and enjoy it.

What always strikes me about the preacher is the seeming

lack of enjoyment he found in his work. Fancy putting all the energy and time he did into his activities and then having to say about it all - it is vanity! Can you understand it? Yet he did say something about work which is very important. In **chapter 9: 10** he states, "**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might**". This is good advice. If you are a Christian, whether you are at school or college, or at work, whatever you do should be the very best that you can do. The New Testament makes it quite clear for Christians that they not only give their service to earthly masters, who pay them, but beyond it all they are really serving the Lord Jesus. Look at **Colossians 3: 23-24**, "**Whatever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not to men . . . for you serve the Lord Christ**". It is true, you know, that you cannot do enough for a good Master, a Master whom you love. This means that if a Christian does all his work from this point of view, there will be found real enjoyment. To work for Jesus brings the greatest joy!

3. It is possible to work to be rewarded.

"**God will bring every work into judgment.**" (**12: 14**) So says the preacher, and it does not seem a very pleasing thought to him. I want you to read carefully **1 Corinthians 3: 10-15**. Here we read of Christian work being reviewed and then rewarded by the Lord.

What does this mean? Paul likens the Christian work to building upon a foundation which he has laid - "**Jesus Christ.**" (**verse 11**) In the character of the work there are two possibilities; gold, silver, precious stones - the things that are worthwhile. Then, wood, hay, stubble - worthless, bulky material, quickly built up but just as quickly destroyed. Notice the way in which Paul describes the TIME of review - "**the day will declare it.**" What day is this? The day spoken of will take place after Christ has come and has gathered all who are His into glory. It is known as the "**judgment seat of Christ.**" (**2 Corinthians 5: 10**) Whatever we do NOW will be reviewed THEN. It is obvious that worthwhile labours for the Lord will be rewarded. (**1 Corinthians 3: 14**) It is also clear that unworthy service will mean loss in that day. The preacher in Ecclesiastes only had a vague idea of what God's judgment upon his work would be. There was no incentive to really enjoy his labour. How different for us as Christians. There is every incentive to serve the Lord Jesus with all the powers we possess. This will bring enjoyment, satisfaction and blessing.

Study 3

The Illusions of Youth

Read Ecclesiastes 11: 9-10; 12: 1-8

It is good to be young! How often we hear this said. Usually it is said by those whose youth is far behind them. Perhaps they say it out of envy or a desire to recapture some of the thrills of younger days. Seldom do I hear young people say this, but maybe it is because there is no need at this stage in their lives for it to be said. Notwithstanding, there is something good about the days of youth. Energy, excitement, enthusiasm, enterprise - all these words express the possibilities of the early years of our lives. Once these have passed, it is not easy to recapture the emotions and desires that were there.

It would seem that the preacher spoke quite a lot in his writings about his experience as a young man. His thirst for

pleasure described in several places in the book, seems to describe the longings of a young life. He is exploring a new world of untasted delights - maybe this is why his reactions are so violent and his disappointments so vividly described. Experience teaches us clearly, that, 'all that glistens is not gold'. But, for the young man, there are so many glittering attractions in life, all to be tried, all to be tasted. The very mystery of the unknown and the untried is excitement in itself. Yet alongside this, so often in our younger days we have no idea of the strength of temptation or the perils that can damage our lives. We feel that warnings are not needed - we are well able to look after ourselves. In the atmosphere of gaiety and pleasure that so often can be ours, the more serious things of life are pushed aside. The carelessness of youth is ours!

In our study we are going to notice two ideas suggested by the preacher regarding our understanding of the value of youth.

1. Chapter 11: 9, "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth; and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth."

2. Chapter 12: 1 "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth."

Two vital statements to consider.

1. Rejoice.

There was a place in his reckoning for the pleasures of youth. Nothing is better than the ability to enjoy life. Healthy, physical exercise is good and it is wise to develop the strength of our bodies. To be a young Christian does not mean the end of all pleasure or the killing of all joys. Nothing is worse than to try to put old heads on young shoulders. You can be sure that God wants us to enjoy all the early good, clean impulses of our days. To be joyful and happy is right. Yet notice what the writer says here - **"but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment"**. (11: 9) With one sentence he seems to suggest that careless abandon to pleasure, for its own sake, is a dangerous policy. He suggests that we are responsible to God for the way we live and behave, however much we give our days to the pursuit of pleasure. So many people think that Christianity is linked with old age and later years. Nothing could be more foolish in life than to reckon this way.

There is also something else to take into account with our pleasures. No pleasure or pursuit brings real joy if it is purely selfish. We have noticed before how self-centred the reasoning of the preacher is. That which hinges on excitement can often harm someone near to us. In pursuing our own enjoyment we could be leaving others out in the cold. This is an aspect of the pleasures of younger days which we tend to forget. The joys of youth will be the greater if we share our pleasures with others.

2. Remember.

Amidst all the temptations to selfish and godless pleasures, the call comes to remember our creator on the threshold of life. God wants the best of our years. The men whom the Lord Jesus called to be His disciples were young men. Their lives were before them and the Lord wanted these to be used for Him. So He wants to use the early days of our lives in His service. A Christian life begun in early years is a whole life of possibility for the Lord Jesus. I am always glad that Paul wrote a letter to a young man, Timothy, about his Christian life. He gave warnings in **1 Timothy 4: 12-16 and 2 Timothy 2: 22**, among others.

He encouraged him to form good habits and give himself wholly to those things which were of God. He sought to make him feel that the younger days of life were vitally important as a foundation for a sound, healthy Christian life. All this is so true. The days of youth pass quickly and then opportunities can be easily lost.

This is perhaps most important in the realm of Bible Study. **Psalm.119: 9** speaks of the Word as a cleansing agent in the life of a young man. To take heed to its precepts is to lay a foundation for pure and holy living. The habit of consistent, systematic reading and study can best be formed in the days of youth. There are less demands made upon the valuable commodity of TIME then, than in later life. Truths grasped and understood in these early years never leave us and they stand us in good stead at all times in the Christian warfare. God speaks to us through His Word. Make sure that in the beginning of your Christian life you develop a listening ear and an obedient heart.

The picture of **Ecclesiastes 12: 2-8** is very fine. It is designed to show the gradual decline of human powers. Through its picture language it stresses the absolute need of using our powers for God while they are at their best. Nothing is worse in later life than regrets because opportunities of usefulness have been lost in early days. A life surrendered to Christ from the start is a life without regrets.

Study 4

No Future?

Read **Ecclesiastes 2: 15-17;**
6: 9-12; 9: 1-6; Luke 16: 19-31

We have reached the final study in this book of the Old Testament. Perhaps you have found it rather difficult to read and study. I hope you have learned something helpful from it. It is very good to be able to do what we have done - to take the rather frustrating results of this man's searching after pleasure and satisfaction, and show how much more can be found through finding and knowing the Lord Jesus Christ. Those things which are higher, greater and more lasting are all found in Him. By way of contrast, we have been seeking to learn the greater things that Christ has for us. I hope you enjoy these wonderful blessings.

In this last study we are going to see how the preacher dealt with the future. In the realm of science there are two instruments used for examining things for research. There is the microscope - the instrument used for studying objects at very close quarters. This magnifies the object so that every detail can be carefully examined. They say it is very wonderful to study snowflakes under a microscope. Great beauty in each flake can be found. But there is also the telescope. This is used for examining objects at long range. The great lightbodies of the universe are thus brought within the range of vision. Well - as Christians - we can look at life either under the microscope or with the telescope. And I think in our study today we are going to use the telescope - we are going to look at life at long range. What has the future for those who are Christians?

The preacher's view of things in the future is not very encouraging. It gives a feeling of hopelessness. He seems to ask questions which he cannot answer. We notice that death seems to end everything - the event which happens to all. I feel rather sad when I read words such as we have in **chapter 3: 19-21**. **"They all have one breath. . . all go**

to one place... all are from the dust and all return to dust... for who can bring him to see what will happen after him”?

So both man and beast have the same end - there is no difference. This is depressing language - giving no hope beyond the grave. And it does not matter whether a person is wise or foolish, rich or poor, righteous or bad - the same event happens to all. What a dismal way of looking at life. Shall we ask ourselves, 'is there not a better way of looking at life than this'?

We can sum up the preacher's ideas in three ways - and remember these ideas were formed out of the way he lived.

1. Death is the end - both for man and beast.
2. Man does not know what shall be after him.
3. The way we live does not make any difference, seemingly, to the future - all die the same.

The Lord Jesus gave a positive answer to each of these limited ideas.

He taught very clearly that **DEATH WAS NOT THE END**. Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this is found in **Luke 16: 19-31**. The lifetime experiences of each of these two men are given to us. The poor man was very poor. A pitiful character without sustenance and health. At the gate of the rich man's house he begs. By contrast the rich man is very rich. Yet he is selfish with his riches. One truth, taught in Ecclesiastes, comes over in this parable. Death comes alike to all - whether poor or rich. But it is NOT the end. The curtain is drawn aside and we are able to see beyond. Lazarus is seen in Heaven, comforted and satisfied. Poverty and sickness are gone. But the rich man is in hell, tortured and alone. Notice the gulf is fixed and there is no relief. Whatever the condition - either Heaven or hell - it is settled for eternity. Let us learn that this is a true picture that Jesus gives. Not fantasy or fiction. In every man or woman there is a Heaven to gain - there is a hell to shun. Eternity for all exists in either one or the other.

We notice now that Jesus taught that **MAN IS ABLE TO KNOW WHAT SHALL BE AFTER HIM**. This is contrary to the tragic thoughts of the preacher. Details of course cannot be known. None of us can fully know what Heaven and hell mean. Yet those who believe in the Lord Jesus are sure of eternal life. John states in his first letter that he wrote to those who believe in the Lord Jesus that they might know that they had eternal life. (**1 John 5: 13**) This is able to bring a deep sense of peace and security in the problems of life. **John 14: 1-3** makes this clear. The Lord Jesus gave to His disciples assurance for the future. He was about to leave them and He realised they would miss Him. So He assured them of His coming again and also that they would be with Him. To Christians this hope makes the future bright - with Christ forever. What a difference to the despair of Ecclesiastes.

Finally, the Lord Jesus taught definitely that **HOW WE LIVE MATTERS**. As we read Ecclesiastes we are confronted with two deadening effects of his philosophy. No incentive, and no reason for responsibility. It is true that the believer in Christ suffers the same problems and tragedies that unbelievers do. And unless Jesus cares all die the same.

But there is no greater incentive to live a holy, worthwhile life than to know that we belong to Christ and that however much life may seem to be the same as others the end will tell the true story. When life is past - eternity begins - and then what really matters will be seen.

Questions

Study 1 FORGOTTEN WISDOM

1. In what way does Satan enslave our lives, and to what is this slavery likened in the story?
2. What did God, in His wisdom, plan to do as an answer to Satan's power?
3. Explain in detail how the Lord Jesus is like the poor wise man of our story.
4. What is the attitude of **“those who are perishing”** to **“the wisdom and power of God?”** (**1 Corinthians 1: 22-24**) Give Scripture references.
5. In what way has the Lord Jesus proved that He has power to destroy Satan? See also **Hebrews 2: 14**.

Study 2 WASTED LABOUR?

1. From **Ecclesiastes 2: 1-11** explain some of the ways in which the preacher sought to gain satisfaction.
2. Why is it wrong for a Christian to waste time? Illustrate from **Luke 19: 11-27**.
3. What should be the controlling principles as we do our daily work? See **Ecclesiastes 9: 10; Colossians 3: 23-24**.
4. Give two reasons why we should give the Lord Jesus the best of our service.
5. From **1 Corinthians 3: 11-15** explain how the works of a Christian will be tried and what will determine their reward.

Study 3 THE ILLUSIONS OF YOUTH

1. Why is it that a life of careless pleasure is so dangerous to young people?
2. What kind of life does God want us to have? (Answer this from the study).
3. Why is it so important to give our lives to Christ while we are young? Give a Scripture to support your answer.
4. If Timothy acted upon the advice that Paul gave him in **1 Timothy 4: 12-16**, what kind of a Christian would he become?
5. 'A life surrendered to the Lord Jesus is a life without regrets.' Say what you understand this to mean.

Study 4 NO FUTURE?

1. From **Ecclesiastes 3: 18-22** explain the preacher's attitude to death and the future.
2. Why would you say that when a man dies, his death is different from that of a beast?
3. Explain the difference between Heaven and hell. Illustrate from **Luke 16: 19-31**.
4. Why will a Christian never be in hell? Explain the hope of a Christian from **John 14: 1-6**.
5. Some prepare for this life only; why is it important to prepare for a life after death? (See **Luke 12: 16-21**)