

July 15 : Scriptures Ecclesiastes 1-4

SUMMARY

So, what is Ecclesiastes about? About 12 chapters long. (Ba-dump-bump! “Thanks. I’ll be here all week!) Okay, seriously, Ecclesiastes needs a little humor. It was written by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12) toward the end of his life. It’s a macro reflection on life and how we should and should not live it. In short, don’t spend your life on meaningless things like the single-minded pursuit of knowledge, wealth, luxury, sex, politics, and religious fervor (HCSB commentary). Instead, we should spend our lives enjoying life and worshiping God.

How does Solomon introduce Ecclesiastes? “‘Absolute futility,’ says the Teacher. ‘Absolute futility. Everything is futile’” (1:2). What does futile mean? Useless or without purpose. What is useless or purposeless to Solomon? After decades of searching, Solomon realized at the end of his life that life is useless or purposeless if we pursue things that ultimately mean *nothing!*

So let me cut to the chase. What will you bring with you to the grave? Your bank account? Hardly. The world’s esteem or fame? Puh-leeze. The enjoyment of a string of sexual escapades? Really? And your impact on the world. What about that? Forgotten. Even if you did make a big impact, it will fade with time until you are, at best, an entry in a dusty history book or forgotten computer file. Solomon ran after many things life offers, pursuing things people think make life meaningful. What did he realize after time and experience? It’s all garbage. Soon-to-be-thrown-out-and-forgotten debris. I remember looking at my High School trophy case. It was a collection of tarnished and dusty metal memorials with the unknown names of people who had long since graduated. Many had already died. And in the spirit of Ecclesiastes, I couldn’t recall one thing those forgotten and vainly memorialized people did.

Getting depressed yet? Yeah, it can be. But we need the negative stuff before we can appreciate the positive stuff. Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature, and wisdom must include *all* of life. Sometimes we learn our best lessons when we stare the sad stuff in the face. Every silver lining has a cloud, right? Wisdom comes to us when we learn the value of what we’re pursuing and whether we should waste our time, talent, treasure, and efforts on it or not. We only go through life once; some of our routes are shorter than others.

I want to start our *Cruisin’ Through The Bible* in Ecclesiastes with a single focus on three facets. 1) What makes life meaningful? 2) What use is there to living the life God gave us? 3) What is our purpose that makes life worthwhile? You’ll find that it’s not what we find

valuable but what God finds valuable that we should embrace. That way, life won't be... futile.

I pray the Lord uses this profound and deeply moving book to help ground you more in Him and focus your vision past the vanities of humanity to the goal of that which lasts into eternity. As we read, let the emotion of the book sweep through you. If something speaks to you, don't read past it. Bathe in the thoughts. Let God talk to you. Ecclesiastes can be a life-altering experience. Let's begin.

Chapter 1 starts with Solomon's "same old, same old" lament. Many people know the phrase, "there is nothing new under the sun." Well, there it is in verse 1:9. This perspective often comes with the benefit of age. Young people think that what they discover is new because it's new to them. Many young people believe their generation is the best generation that ever lived and often dismiss those generations that came before them. Yes, I'm speaking from experience, both as one who did this to the generation before me and the recipient of such dismissal from the two generations behind me. Solomon notes the sun, wind, and streams (1:5-7). They're always doing the same thing – yada, yada, yada. Nothing new, and it all seems boring (tiresome) to Solomon. 1:10 returns to the "nothing new under the sun" theme, but then there's an abrupt, startling halt. "There is no remembrance of those who came before; and of those who will come after there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them" (1:11). Wow! That's a sobering thought. You were born, you'll live, die, and be forgotten. To me, this implies the need for something more to make life worthwhile. Apparently, this need captured King Solomon's attention, so he turned his wisdom to ferret out what might meet that need for value, significance, and meaning (1:13). What did he find? Eh. Even his vast wisdom wasn't enough. It only amplified the sense that everything was meaningless and useless. In other words, his wisdom showed how pointless it was to pursue things that weren't significant in the long run.

Chapter 2 lists examples of what Solomon pursued – pleasure, possessions, and achievements. He denied himself nothing and excelled over all the kings around him. What is his conclusion? "When I considered all that I had accomplished and what I had labored to achieve, I found everything to be futile and a pursuit of the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11). Swing and a miss! So rather than look outward, Solomon looks inward, specifically at his wisdom. Does his wisdom add value and meaning to life? Yes, it does, when compared with foolishness, as light is so much better than darkness. *But*. But then Solomon considered the end that all human beings face – death. The wise and foolish persons meet the same demise. When it comes to death,

there's no advantage for the person who has wisdom and everything else over the fool who has nothing. In that light, we're back to the meaningless square one (2:16-17).

The topic of wise and foolish persons leads Solomon to compare the two, not side by side, but in succession, a wise father and a foolish son. What benefits a wise person to work hard and become successful if his achievements are left to a foolish successor, son or otherwise (2:18-19)? Nothing. That really makes Solomon despair at the utter futility of his massive efforts, as he recounted earlier. Come to think of it, that's *precisely* what happened after he died. The wisest man in the world left God's Israelite kingdom in the hands of a very foolish son, Rehoboam, whose foolish response to his subjects split the kingdom, albeit per the Lord's design. Sadly, the kingdom was divided between two fools – Rehoboam and Jeroboam I. Solomon decries a familiar inheritance question, "When there is a person whose work was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and he must give his portion to a person who has not worked for it, this too is futile and a great wrong" (2:21). That's even true when foolish government officials take more than enough taxes from a person and give it to those who don't have financial means of support. I'm not talking about people who can't work for good reasons, but people who won't work. Sadly, that kind of madness has been happening with the welfare state since the 1960s. Then Solomon turns his thought back on his work and how it dogs him, creates grief, and keeps him up at night. Again, we hear him mull, "What's the use?"

But there's a silver lining around his cloud. Simplicity. Solomon boils it down to essentials – "There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work" (2:24) – which are a gift from God. This verse answers one of our big three questions: 1) What makes life meaningful? Because God gave it to us, we are to enjoy ourselves as we're occupied. Furthermore, God will provide wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:24) to the one who pleases Him while the sinner is distracted with the work of life, only to hand it over to the one who pleases God. *The sinner's* kind of life is futile.

Chapter 3 opens with the song "Turn, Turn, Turn," written by Pete Seeger in 1955 and recorded in 1959. Later made famous by the early rock band, The Byrds in 1965. If you're not familiar with it, check it out on YouTube. Mr. Seeger found inspiration from these Bible verses, which is interesting because the Bible is often blasphemed when quoted in today's music scene. So what does Solomon want to tell us with this "A time for everything" section (2:1-8)? Without getting too philosophical, this section concerns mortality and the moments we experience on earth. No one lives forever on earth (right now), and everything we do will pass away when we do. Each stanza is a parallel with a positive and negative aspect. Sure, we'd like to always live on the positive side, but for life to be lived fully, there's the negative side. Those negative things aren't necessarily

pleasant but essential to human existence. The dark makes the light brighter. The light eases the darkness, and that's the best we can do. (Wow, I'm beginning to sound like Solomon.) Even in the negative things of life – dying, uprooting, weeping, and mourning – an existential beauty can be experienced. Remember, Solomon is an old man as he writes this, and Ecclesiastes shares his sense of mortality and end-of-life self-evaluation.

So, what do we get with this merry-go-round ride of life? What do we gain? The implication is *nothing* when viewed through the temporariness of our existence. *But we are always compelled to move forward because we were created to seek and live in God's forever world.* I once heard that we measure time due to entropy, the way energy dissipates. We age, and the aging process marks the passage of time. So in the meantime, as we age and seek the eternal, the sense which God has placed within us, we are to do "Adam's work." That is to subdue and rule the earth in various capacities and with enjoyment until we die (3:10-12). As we work, we become aware that only God's work lasts forever, which should induce awe in us (3:14). The last verse in this section is odd, "However, God seeks justice for the persecuted" (3:15), but it leads us to the next part.

Solomon ponders the injustice of wickedness in place of justice and righteousness. He knows God will make all things right, but he sees a purpose even in this. God uses such things to "test people" and show humanity we aren't all that. We're no better than the animals, and we regard animals as lower than us, but we share their mortality. Therefore, since we're all going to die, we should enjoy what God has given us – our lives and work.

Finally, in chapter 4, Solomon returns to the justice/injustice topic. His conclusion? Futile. Meaningless. The dead are better off than the living, and it would be best if people had never been born at all if this is what they face in life (4:1-3). Okay, so what about wealth? Surely wealth adds meaning and purpose to life, Solomon? Nope. In Solomon's view, many people's motivation to acquire wealth is to outdo their neighbor, the classic "keeping up with the Jones" bit (4:1). On the other hand, the fool who doesn't work eats up himself and has nothing to support him. Solomon turns a familiar idea around that work brings meaning to life, and we should all be busy. Not so, writes Solomon. We must balance work with enjoying rest (4:6). This statement goes back to chapter 3's opening; there's a time for everything under the sun.

Solomon turns his attention to the value of companionship, whether a friend, family or a mate. Without human companionship, why does a person work? Human companionship adds meaning and purpose to life by supporting one another (4:9-12). Okay, so there's that to answer questions 1 and 3; What makes life meaningful, and what is our purpose that makes life worthwhile?

And now for politics. Solomon gives us his take on politics. I have to share what my Bible commentary says about this because I wrestled with how I would summarize this section. "This section illustrates how fleeting political power is. There are two people here. The first person is an old king, who in his youth was poor but he rose to power through skill and perseverance. This king is now old but foolish. He has been in power for so long that he has lost touch with changing political circumstances. The second person is a youth who, possessing the political skills the old king once had but last, is now ready and able to usurp him. But even though the second youth is successful for a time and pleases the crowd, he will also eventually get old, lose touch, and be abandoned. He is just the latest in a long line of kings who come and go. Political power and popularity are by nature fleeting." Yes, that's politics today. See? There's nothing new under the sun.

INSIGHT

I'm amazed at people who spend *so much time and energy* trying to be influencers. Their lives are wrapped up in making videos, taking pictures, doing podcasts, and using social media to stay relevant. What an insane thing to do in light of Ecclesiastes! Their files will be deleted, and their pictures will fade. Memories of them will be forgotten, and all that work for what? An exercise in narcissism? Let's take a moment to honestly think about what we do and why we do it. As we go through Ecclesiastes, let's find that balance Solomon has revealed in today's reading.

July 16 : Scriptures Ecclesiastes 5-8

SUMMARY

As we begin chapter 5, I can summarize it with Solomon's words in verse 7, "Fear God." in today's church, I know we treat God far too lightly. We chatter our way into church services, where we are to worship the Almighty God with barely any preparation or self-examination. We've done more to make our service attractive and pleasing to people than attractive and pleasing to God. (Yes, I saw that meme on Facebook – "Don't design A church service to attract people. Design a church service to attract God, and the people will come.") It's so true. And what about the rest of our lives? Do we create a life to attract people, or do we live to attract God and then invite people to follow? What is our motivation? If we don't have the proper perspective on God, we risk making even our worship meaningless and futile (5:1-7). Solomon is right. We need wisdom and perspective to approach God. And as he says in Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

From worshipping God, Solomon moves to "worshipping" wealth. Making the pursuit of wealth your life's purpose is futile. Here are the problems with that: It's an endless pursuit. People just want you for your money. What are you going to do once you accumulate it? Stare at it? No, you're going to worry about keeping it while the working man has his needs met and sleeps well. Wealth gained in business can just as easily be lost. You can't take it with you. And pursuing wealth as a life goal is, as Solomon says, "much frustration, sickness, and anger" (5:8-17). There! How's that? What does Solomon say we should do about the whole financial thing? It's good to work and gain wealth but enjoy what God has given us (5:18-20).

Chapter 6 continues Solomon's wisdom riff on wealth. On the other hand, to what he pointed out in chapter 5, it's a tragedy to be given wealth by God and yet not be able to enjoy it because God calls that person home. All that wealth just goes to a stranger (6:1-2). And if that wealthy person doesn't enjoy his wealth and, in the end, doesn't even have enough for a proper burial, what's the point? Solomon uses a striking comparison. In essence, he says a child that never lived is better off than one who lived and lost everything and came to the same end (6:3-6). So what drives us to labor for wealth? Solomon says it's our desires (his stomach), yet our desires are never satisfied. In the light of death, even the wise person has no advantage over the fool. So, it's best to be satisfied with what we have (6:7-9). At the end of chapter 6, Solomon returns to the "there's nothing new under the sun" topic. People love to chatter about some brilliant insight, and I've been guilty of that. Even what I think is novel, somebody has already considered and expounded. This isn't a hard and fast rule. There are discoveries in science, philosophy,

technology, etc. Solomon says that in light of death, we should learn to live well with happiness.

Chapter 7 begins with a series of proverbs. In short, they encourage us to live life soberly, wisely, and righteously. Solomon's advice isn't to say we can't have fun, but there's a balance. Pursuing a "fun and games life" is futile and misses the serious things that are a natural part of life. I particularly like verse 10, "Don't say, 'Why were the former days better than these?'" Solomon says that's a dumb question. They weren't. You can always find something in the good old days that's not good. And didn't we yearn for good things to come? Dwelling in the past removes the enjoyment of living in the present. Even though Ecclesiastes discourages making wealth your main goal in life, Solomon does recognize that money is essential. However, wisdom paired with financial security is good, and we should accept what comes to us (7:11-14). The next part in verse 15 may seem like Solomon is encouraging us to add a little sinning to our lives. That's not the case. He's encouraging us to pursue righteousness, but not so religiously overzealous that we become weird and out of balance. The rest of the scripture is straightforward. We should strive to be godly. We should also recognize that we can't be perfectly holy. And along those lines, knowing our faults, we should patiently put up with those who sin against us (7:21-22).

This last part of Chapter 7 is a challenge. Despite having great wisdom, Solomon acknowledges that there's a limit. So he applied his limited but great wisdom to life. Solomon discovered a man-centered understanding of human relationships, particularly between a man and a woman. He's not saying that women are evil and that humanity does not have one good woman. He recognizes that male-female relationships have built-in tension because of the Fall (Genesis 3). Considering all of Ecclesiastes, it is equally valuable to men and women.

Chapter 8 starts with Solomon's take on how a person should relate to someone in authority (8:1-9). Verse 11 is interesting, "Because the sentence against an evil act is not carried out quickly, the heart of people is filled with the desire to commit evil." What's Solomon's point? The wicked brazenly attend worship in God's holy Temple and yet continue in their sin without repercussion. Why? Justice delayed. Oh, they *will* get justice when they're buried (8:10). That justice-delayed part is so frustrating. But even though the wicked live long, Solomon knows that the righteous will be rewarded, and justice will ultimately be served. In the meantime, we shouldn't be surprised to see the righteous punished and the wicked go free. That's a sad part of life on earth for now. But it won't be forever. In the face of this futility, sometimes the best thing is to get on with life and enjoy it.

INSIGHT

“The sleep of the worker is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of the rich permits him no sleep” (5:12). There is beauty in the simple life. Yes, I’ve often dreamed about coming into a large sum of moo-lah. When I daydreamed about winning the lottery, I immediately asked, “How would I handle the immense amount of ching?” I began divvying it up between family members, building trusts for my children, setting some aside for charities, using some to spoil myself, etc. Pretty soon, my head started to hurt as I thought about how I would “protect” the remaining amount. The thought of managing the accounts and investments was overwhelming, and I realized I would have to hire a financial manager to take on that task because it was too much for me. Yeah, I would like a bunch of cash, but I want a simple life, too. Unless someone else handles it, the two desires would never exist together. Solomon was right.

July 17 : Scriptures Ecclesiastes 9-12

SUMMARY

In today's reading, we'll reach the end of Ecclesiastes. Let's see what Solomon has for us. Chapter 9 starts with a crescendo into verse 3. "This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone." Yep, death comes to the wicked in the righteous, bar none. However, some see the inevitability of death as a reason to get all they can in this life, even through wicked means. As my Bible commentary says, "they become *full of evil, and madness*. They cling to life, and use proverbs such as *a live dog is better than a dead lion*. Indeed, Ecclesiastes wants us to take death seriously. If we do, we'll realize how fleeting the passions that fuel our lives. But despair and self-abandonment are not the answer" (9:1-6). Amen! So, what should we do, Solomon? What should be our response to the inevitability of death? Enjoy life with your spouse (9:7-10)!

Again, Solomon sees the limitations of wisdom. Time and chance play a part (9:11-12). So does economic status at times. Yes, a poor but wise man saved a city, but he and his deliverance were forgotten because he was poor.

We come to one of those unfortunate chapter breaks that interrupt the flow of the scriptural thought. 9:17-18 flows into 10:1. Wisdom is better than force, but even one sinful mistake can wreck the wisest of plans. The parallel is in 10:1. The one sinful mistake that ruins plans = a little folly that counteracts wisdom and honor.

Chapter 10 continues with a series of proverbs. Verse 2-3 is a cultural goodie. In biblical thought, the right hand is strong, and the left hand is weak. Therefore, wisdom in a person's heart is strength, and foolishness in a person's heart makes one weak, and his foolishness is evident to everyone. Neat, huh? Going on, sometimes rulers promote those they shouldn't and ignore the people they should promote (10:5-7). Criminal activity can bring harm back to the criminal (10:8), but even honest work can harm the innocent (10:9). Wisdom brings success. Still, it must be done in a timely manner (10:10-11, Bible commentary). 10:12-15 is about kings and their counselors, whether they are wise or foolish. A foolish counselor says a lot of stuff, often with surety, without knowing how a matter might play out. It's good to have experienced leadership rather than inexperienced (10:16-17). To have a good life, be diligent over issues, have some money on hand, and be careful how you deal with authorities (10:18-20).

Chapter 11 is a lens on what it takes to have a good life. There are very practical proverbs. Make the most of many opportunities. You don't know which ones will pay off. Don't be concerned about what might happen, or you'll never get moving. There are just some

things you won't understand. As long as you're awake, take advantage of the day. This proverb is similar to the make the most of your opportunity's advice above. Enjoy the sunny days because there are dark ones, i.e., life has ups and downs. Enjoy the "ups!" And speaking of sunny days, youth is like a sunny day. Age brings us through dark days, and our end is death. A wise young person appreciates and makes the most of their early years!

And in keeping with the advice to the young adult at the end of chapter 11, chapter 12 hits the bell. "So remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (12:1). Why do that? Before age sets in and it begins to "darken" our physical senses and bodies (12:1-2), which Solomon poetically describes:

Vs. 3 – Our body's support structure begins to weaken and give way, referring to the hands, legs, back, and shoulders. Our teeth fall out, and our eyes fail.

Vs. 4 – Our hearing fails, and we don't sleep well, rising from bed early in the morning.

Vs. 5 – We worry about falling and the danger of other people taking advantage of us. Almond blossoms (white hair), grasshoppers and caper berries refer to a decreased sex drive or failure. All these signs of age remind us that our death and funeral are getting closer.

Vs. 6-7 – Solomon portrays death in picturesque ways, and

Vs. 8 – We reach our expiration date.

So what did Solomon do in the face of his approaching death? He used his wisdom to transmit his understanding to later generations. It worked! We're reading him right now, although he's been dead for about 2,900 years. Solomon's efforts are an excellent example for us. Let's strive to leave something behind for others, especially our family.

But even in all of his writing and work, Solomon hits the essential word for us, his conclusion. "Fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil" (12:12-14).

So what about the three questions? Can we answer them now? Let's try. 1) What makes life meaningful? When we live our God-given life fully with wisdom and righteousness, taking what comes to us via God's loving hands. 2) What use is there to living the life God gave us? We are stewards of our God-given lives, and a good steward makes the most of what they've been given. 3) What is our purpose that makes life worthwhile? To fear God and live the way He wants us to live.

INSIGHT

Solomon's final words are why I'm writing *Cruisin' Through The Bible*. It's not going to be a literary masterpiece. But I hope anyone who reads it will be encouraged to embrace the Bible and dive deep into God's revelation of Himself and His plan to restore everything as He originally made it. I hope it's a great legacy for my children, grandchildren, and on down the family line. They won't remember me, and others won't know me. It doesn't matter. My readers need to know God, and we'll all meet up later.

July 18 : Scriptures Song of Solomon 1-4

SUMMARY

When was the last time you heard a pastor preach a message based on the Song of Solomon? Right. Never. Because the book is an ode to the wonderfulness of the husband-wife relationship in very frank terms, this is not the usual fare we study during the Christian Education Hour. But it *is* in God's word, so there must be value in it. Some Christians get silly about the book by over-spiritualizing it, making it about Jesus and His Bride, the collective of born-again believers. Quite frankly, doing so makes me uncomfortable, along with the worship songs that swoon with the "Jesus is my boyfriend" romanticized lyrics. Just let the Bible say what it says. Put on your big boy/girl pants and rejoice in Solomon's wonderfully beautiful experience with his Shulamite wife. We'll read about his courtship, the sexiness of their first night together, and their charming and tender relationship. Ah, romance and intimacy as God intended!

I have to include what my Study Bible says about how SOS is constructed because it's so cool. The book is written as a chiasm, that is, in chiastic form. As I've pointed out, Hebrew poetry is often presented in parallels. A chiasm is a parallel form. This diagram is the chiasm in SOS:

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A
  B
    C
      D
        C' (C prime)
          B'
            A'
  
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Do you see the pattern? So here's how the book's main sections are laid out:

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A Their Story Begins (1:2-2:7)
  B Invitation To Enjoy A Spring Day (2:6-17)
    C Night of Separation Preceding the Wedding (3:1-5)
      D Wedding Day and Night (3:6-5:1)
        C' Night of Separation Following The Wedding Night (5:2-7:9)
          B' Invitation to Enjoy A Spring Day (7:10-8:4)
            A' Their Story Complete (8:5-14)
  
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[Thanks to the HCSB Study Bible Commentary for the above.]

So while we go through the book chapter by chapter, keep an eye on the above chiasm.

With SOS 1, their story begins! Boy, does it begin – with intensity. The soon-to-be-identified Shulammitte beauty is greatly enamored with her beloved, and she's aware that all the other women know how remarkably handsome he is. She describes herself as "dark" because her brothers made her work in their household's vineyards. After all, they were angry with her. She longs to rest in her lover's shade. So, in verse 8, he calls to her to join him. He describes her beauty using the image of a fine Egyptian mare. Egyptian horses were famous for their stunning form, and the lover's description is of the gold and jewels the magnificent mares wore. We're now into a tender tête-à-tête between the two. She dreams of her lover in her arms, resting upon her during the wedding night to come. He admires the look of love in her eyes, and she envisions being with him under the trees.

In SOS 2, she compares herself to a beautiful flower, a rose, and a lily, and her lover, Solomon, agrees. Any other woman's loveliness pales compared to his lady. Wow, what a smooth talker Solomon is! And so is she. She seems to swoon just thinking about being in his presence, embraced by him. In 2:8, we move into the Invitation To Enjoy A Spring Day (2:6-17) section. What a sweet scene that unfolds. She sees him coming and describes his approach as a strong gazelle gracefully bounding toward her. Solomon calls her to join him among the blossoming, fragrant fruit tree and grapevines. These pictures are an excellent metaphor for the approaching wedding night. Flowers precede the full harvest and enjoyment of fruit, if you know what I mean. But speaking of vineyards, the Shulammitte warns about little foxes that can spoil them, meaning they need to watch out for little things that could damage their romance (2:15). But for now, their relationship is strong. She affirms their devotion to each other and dreams of him.

SOS 3 opens on the Night of Separation Preceding the Wedding (3:1-5). When I began to love my wife, there were times I couldn't stand being apart from Jeanne, and I would daydream of abandoning whatever I was doing to drive over to her house just to hang out. Yeah, I know. Romantic. But the Shulammitte's yearning because of the couple's separation resonates with me. Don't worry. They start the night apart, but they end it together. The Shulammitte looks for Solomon, finds him, and takes him to her mother's chamber, where they fall asleep together. Nope, no sex. Just time together. How do we know? Because she cautions the "young women of Jerusalem, "do not stir up or awaken love until the appropriate time" (3:5), which is what premarital sex does. The wedding night is special because it's the guilt-free, joyful, and unabashed awakening.

And now we arrive at the Wedding Day and Night (3:6-5:1). The Shulammitte sees her groom approaching, carried on his sedan chair. She invites the women of Jerusalem to look upon her groom and admire the glory of her king's arrival on their wedding day (3:11).

The wedding day and night continue in SOS 4 with Solomon admiring his bride's stunning beauty. I love reading through this because of the wonderful images Solomon invokes to describe her (4:1-5). He intensely awaits their time of intimacy and full expression of love for her (4:6-7). He calls her to come to him because the time is nigh (4:8), and he proclaims his love for her with more admiration (9-11). To him, she is a "locked garden with a sealed spring," that is, she's a virgin. Now is the time to awaken love. The Shulammitte is ready and invites Solomon to partake of her passion, which he does. The final verse (5:1) is as if a Narrator steps onto the stage and encourages the couple to enjoy themselves to the fullest! (Man, is it getting hot in here?)

INSIGHT

There's a big difference between Western and Hebraic thinking. Western thinking comes from the Greek worldview, and Hebraic thinking comes from the ancient Hebrews and was developed in the minds of the Jewish people of Jesus' day. What does this have to do with the Song of Solomon? Because Greek thinking about sex was very different from the Hebraic/Biblical mindset. The Greeks had a dualistic idea of the physical and spiritual worlds. The two were separate. The physical was the "evil" part of existence, and the spiritual side was the "good" part. While the Greeks admired the perfect human form, it stood in the way of a better spiritual realm. "Oh, that we could be freed from our bodies so that we may more perfectly live in the spiritual realm." The Hebraic mindset looked at the physical and spiritual world as God's creation, and both were deemed "very good."

For the Greeks (and Romans), sex was enjoyable but utilitarian. For the Hebrews/Jews, sex was a blessing from God. After all, he equipped human beings for sex and commanded them to have at it to make children (Genesis 1). But what about sexual pleasure between married people? That's what the Song of Solomon celebrates. Sex is "very good" as long as it's within God's boundaries, and the Lord encourages sexual pleasure, as we've seen in this book. However, as the Greek mindset worked its way into the thinking and theology of the new stream of messianic Judaism called Christianity, the life of celibacy was exalted because the body is evil and, therefore, so is sex. Judaism elevates the sexual relationship between married people as part of God's intent and design.

July 19 : Scriptures Song of Solomon 5-8

SUMMARY

SOS 5 is the Night of Separation Following The Wedding Night (5:2-7:9). What an amazing turnaround. Before the wedding, the Shulammite couldn't sleep because she so intensely yearned to be with him. Now he calls while she's asleep (5:2). Does his wife leap from her bed and invite him in? Nope. She's reluctant and wants to sleep. Solomon tries the latch but to no avail. His wife decides to respond finally, but... he's gone! She's crushed and runs to find him. Where previously, the city guards helped her find Solomon, they now hinder her. They don't recognize Solomon's wife and treat her harshly, but that doesn't deter her search. She calls to her friends to help her find her love. They ask her why she's so lovesick for him. The Shulammite responds with an ode to her husband's overwhelming handsomeness. "This is my love, and this is my friend, young women of Jerusalem" (5:16).

SOS 6 continues the Night of Separation section. The young women ask the Shulammite where he's gone, and Solomon's wife reveals where she thinks he's gone after her rebuff. Sure enough, Solomon awaits her, refreshing himself with thoughts of her comeliness (6:4-9). Verse 11 is a metaphor for a new start, "to see the blossoms of the valley, to see if the vines were budding and the pomegranates blooming." As she thought of a new start with her husband, her thoughts began to race, "Before I knew it my heart was raptured, carried away by lofty thoughts!" Solomon's wife finds him, and the two reconcile (6:13).

SOS 7 begins with the make-up "whoopie," replete with Solomon's description of his beloved as he tenderly enjoys her during their love-making, ending with her declaration to her beloved, "I am my love's, and his desire is for me" (7:10). Where she previously rebuffed her husband's advance, now she gives her Invitation to Enjoy A Spring Day (7:10-8:4) and what an invitation it is! The chiasm is evident here as the section recalls the earlier courtship section. Only now, Solomon's wife freely offers herself to him (7:13).

We conclude with SOS 8 and the Shulammite's desire to kiss Solomon innocently in public but then take him inside for some luxurious canoodling. I like how my study Bible puts 8:4. "Caution in love is important, but when the time is appropriate, don't let its joy pass you by." With 8:5, we complete our chiastic pattern, Their Story Complete (8:5-14). This final section shifts focus from praising the lovers to praising love itself. For example, "For love is as strong as death; jealousy is as unrelenting as Sheol. Love's flames are fiery flames—an almighty flame! A huge torrent cannot extinguish love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If a man were to give all his wealth for love, it would be utterly scorned" (8:6-7).

The cryptic verses, 8:8-9, are the Shulammité's brothers talking and how they protected her until she was ready for marriage. According to my study Bible, now that she had developed a mature character (wall) and body, she was ready, and her husband found peace in her virtue. What follows is another metaphor. Solomon leased out what belonged to him to his wife's brothers when she was a very young child. As they tended Solomon's vineyard for him, so they tended the girl who would be Solomon's wife unbeknownst to them. Although vineyards can be bought and sold, love cannot. It must be freely given, just like the Shulammité's love for Solomon.

The final two verses suggest another garden where two people were created to love, support, bless, and enjoy each other.

INSIGHT

I've realized that after 39 years of marriage, courtship still matters. Like Solomon and his wife, there are times when romantic feelings lose their intensity. Married couples need to pursue one another actively, and it's never too late to make amends and make a fresh start. When we are loving, loving feelings return.

July 20 : Scriptures Isaiah 1-3

SUMMARY

Isaiah was one of Israel's greatest prophets. His ministry stretched from 740-698 B.C. During this time, the northern kingdom was deep in idolatry, and the southern kingdom of Judah was also struggling with it, although not so consistently. Israel had a string of evil kings leading to God's exile of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. by the Assyrian Empire. Judah had a roller coaster of good and evil kings, i.e., those who were unfaithful to God and those who remained steadfastly committed to Him. As the kings went, so went the people. Isaiah's ministry covered the reigns of Uzziah (Isaiah's call in Isaiah 6), Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh. According to tradition, Manasseh killed Isaiah by inserting him into a hollow log and sawing him in half. Hebrews seems to reference this (Hebrews 11:37).

Isaiah's name means "Yehovah saves" or "salvation is from Yehovah." His name is wonderfully appropriate since Isaiah has some of the most accurate and stunning prophecies concerning Jesus – who He was, why He was sent, what He would do, and why He did it. Isaiah's prophecies forth-tell what's on God's mind and fore-tell what's to come in God's plan. His proclamations swing from astounding rebukes to tender comforts, from Israel and Judah (God's people) to the world's nations. Isaiah speaks to his time and the end of the age when Yehovah wraps up His redemptive plan to restore the earth to its original state – an Edenized world.

Don't be confused as Isaiah jumps around chronologically. I'll try to orient you as much as I can. What's important to grasp is what he says and what we can learn from his ministry. Also, Isaiah seems to be written in two books, Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66, because Isaiah could not have been around to write the latter part. That's if you believe God can't speak into the future. For now, we'll go with Isaiah as the author of the whole book. His main themes are God as the Holy One of Israel, Trust the Lord, God's stand against idolatry, and the Messiah to come (God's Servant). So let's begin.

Isaiah 1 launches Isaiah's prophecy with a brief introduction (1:1) followed by a stinging indictment. He calls on God's two covenant witnesses, heaven and earth, to bear witness to Israel's failure to live up to their covenant with Yehovah (1:2). They're dumber than animals, weighed down by sin, and have abandoned their God and King. The nation is experiencing covenant judgments, leaving them beaten and bloody, metaphorically (and literally) speaking. The Lord describes their horrible state after being attacked by enemies – destroyed, burned, and desolate after foreign armies have come and taken all they have. Isaiah uses a rich image of a shack in a field for Israel standing all alone in their decimated

land (1:8). With the Lord's burning anger, Isaiah tells the people God doesn't want their burdensome, hypocritical worship. He wants their repentance. Until then, Yehovah refuses to respond to them (1:15). After excoriating them, Yehovah tells them how to return to Him by ceasing evil and learning to do good (1:16-17), recommitting themselves to follow His Torah's laws, commands, and guidelines. He reassures His people that they are not so far gone that He won't forgive them (1:18), and if they return, He'll bless them. If not, then they get more of the same (1:19).

Through Isaiah, God tells Judah what Jerusalem is like to Him – an unfaithful wife full of wickedness. Jerusalem is filled with corrupt leaders and injustice, forsaking the needy. Therefore, Yehovah will drop the hammer on Judah and treat them like enemies rather than covenant partners. But God's purpose is not to destroy them but to restore them. We see God's heart for restoration and salvation from the very start. His work will be so complete that His people will be ashamed of their idolatry and how it rendered them fuel for burning (1:29-31).

Isaiah 2 is a vision Isaiah received from God concerning the southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem. After the opening volley from God's cannon in chapter 1, this is a stunning End Time prophecy. Though the current condition of Judah and Jerusalem was terrible, there's coming a day when the remarkable happens. The "mountain of the Lord's house," literally the Temple Mount, will become the most important place in the world. Isaiah's vision is of a future day when *all* the nations will bend the knee to the God of Israel, our Creator, and will go to Jerusalem to honor and worship Him. God will rule and reign from Jerusalem, and His Torah will be the law of the land – the entire earth (2:3). The Lord will rule over the whole world, and there will be no more wars among His children (2:4). In the meantime, Yehovah calls to His people to walk in His light (His Torah) now (2:5). But the Lord has stepped back from His people due to their sin – practicing occultism and unholy national alliances. At the same time, they wallow in affluence, power, and idolatry. However, a specific day called the Day of the Lord is coming. The Day of the Lord is a moment when God takes a very active role in human affairs. The Day (as it's referred to) is when God judges His people and the nations (2:9). The problem from Eden was humanity's gall, believing they could become like God. Pride has fueled humanity's rebellion from the beginning.

The only way to restore humanity as before is for the Lord to deal with the pride problem. As you read, note that this will happen on the Day of the Lord (2:9, 11-17). The examples Isaiah uses represent humanity's pride – the mighty cedar of Lebanon, high mountains, lofty hills, high towers, fortified walls, ships of Tarshish, and every splendid sea vessel. On the Day of the Lord, Yehovah will eliminate idolatry as idolators try to hide from the

One True God, their enemy, because of their idolatry. What is Isaiah's message? Since this is what's coming, "Put no more trust in a mere human, who has only the breath in his nostrils. What is he really worth?" (2:22). Compared to God, people are nothing. This last verse brings to the fore one of Isaiah's themes – trust. In whom do we place our trust? God or people?

Don't let the Isaiah 3 heading throw you off. It's a continuation of chapter 2. Since Yehovah's people trust men, God will give them some pre-Day of the Lord's judgment to teach them whom they should trust – Him. Yehovah will remove human security from Jerusalem and Judah (3:1). As a result, the only people left to lead are youths, usually inexperienced and arrogant (see Solomon's son, king Rehoboam, 1 Kings 12). These unstable youths will oppress and disrespect those who are subject to them. There will be so few leaders that a person qualifies as a leader for simply having a coat. But then again, no problem because Jerusalem will be a pile of rubble by that time (3:6). Why is Yehovah going to do this? Because the Judahites have grown arrogant and defiant in their idolatry. As for the righteous, no sweat. God will care for His faithful ones. But the wicked will get hit hard as they had dealt with others (3:11). They were lousy and oppressive leaders, so they'll have youths and women to rule them (3:12). The Judge has spoken and declared His sentence (3:13)!

Speaking of Judah's women, Isaiah has a scathing word from the Lord for them. Judah's men aren't the only ones steeped in pride. The picture Isaiah paints of these women are prideful, snooty wenches with noses in the air, pampering themselves with the finest in life. The list in verse 18 of the things they adorn themselves paints a precious picture. However, God's judgment on Judah will bring just the opposite. They'll be stinky, shorn, shabbily clothed, and branded as enslaved people after Judah's enemies arrive to carry out God's command. There won't be any men to admire them as the war will kill most of the male Judahites. There won't be enough men to go around, so the women multiple women will beg for polygamy so that they can remove their disgrace of being single (4:1).

INSIGHT

Many Christians shy away from the "Law" (God's Torah, "commands, instructions, guidelines) because they haven't been taught properly. For those like this who enter God's kingdom, it'll be a shock to realize that the Torah still applies and is the foundation for living with Jesus. I wonder if they'll wish they had studied for the test better?

July 21 : Scriptures Isaiah 4-6

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 reveals the coming “day of the Lord.” There have been multiple days of the Lord when He acted against and for His people. However, there is only one Day of the Lord at the end of the age, the human era. What Isaiah has been describing is a day of the Lord’s judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem for their idolatry. Babylon will make that happen after Isaiah dies. Isaiah 4 looks forward to *the* Day of the Lord, marked by specific things. The Branch of the Lord will appear, beautiful and glorious (4:2), the land will produce abundantly, and those who live in Jerusalem will be holy, without sin. Isaiah borrows the example of the bad things from the previous chapter and uses them to illustrate what the final Day of the Lord will be. In 3, the land languishes. In 4, the land prospers. In 3, the women are spiritually filthy with blood guilt (were they practicing abortion or abusing other people?). In 4, the women are washed and cleansed. In short, as evil and defiled by sin as Judah and Jerusalem are in Isaiah’s day, there’s a future time when that will all be washed away. This washing will happen during the time of the Branch. As you’ll see in other prophecies, the Branch title references God’s coming Messiah, David’s descendant. We know Him as Jesus. Since this restoration of Jerusalem didn’t happen when Jesus first showed up about 2,000 years ago, the coming Day of the Lord that includes Judah and Jerusalem’s restoration and cleansing must occur when Jesus returns.

Finally, Isaiah reveals a stunning picture of what will happen after God’s judgment, Jesus’ return on the Day of the Lord, and He begins to reign from Jerusalem. “Then the Lord will create a cloud of smoke by day and a glowing flame of fire by night over the entire site of Mount Zion and over its assemblies. For there will be a canopy over all the glory, and there will be a shelter for shade from heat by day and a refuge and shelter from storm and rain” (4:5-6). Imagine that! God’s physical presence will hover over Jerusalem as when Israel’s King followed His people through the Wilderness for forty years between the Exodus and when Israel entered Canaan.

We now shift gears as Isaiah 5 begins with a parable that indicts all of Israel, north and south. The parable illustrates how God took great care to provide a place for His people in Canaan, and he expected them to remain faithful and produce the fruit of lives that live His way. But alas, no such thing happened. The vineyard produced “worthless grapes,” idolatrous people who violated their covenant with God by rejecting Him and living sinfully. Through Isaiah, God asks a question. “Who’s to blame here, Israel? I did all I could, but you didn’t.” So Yehovah has decided to do to them as He depicted in the parable. He will remove its protection (His protection) and allow neighboring enemies to

come into the land to trample it down and consume its fruit (the people). Then the land will lie fallow and remain untended with weeds growing and sparse rain (5:6). Again, Yehovah is doing this because His people failed to walk according to His Torah.

God now lists Judah's sins and what's coming. A "woe" is a biblical way to label a prophetic judgment from God. Israel's first woe involves affluent and evil people who buy land and do not let their fellow Israelites live on it, thus displacing families from their ancestral plots. Those houses and lands will become empty and desolate (5:8-10). The second woe is for the party people, who drink to excess and forget God and what they should be doing for Him. They will be shipped off to other lands (5:11-17). Many will die of starvation and thirst. All of them will be humbled. The third woe is for people who sin *a lot!* Because of their profoundly sinful condition, they mock God. "Sure, He *says* He's going to bring judgment, but where is it? Bring it on" (5:18-19). The fourth woe is for the people who are so spiritually messed up that they purposefully call good evil and evil good. Their ethics are entirely reversed (5:20). The fifth woe is for the people who refuse God and look to themselves (5:21). And the sixth woe is directed toward the extreme drinkers who pervert justice for money (5:22-23).

For all these sins, the Lord is *hot* with anger. Not only will He strike the land and cause starvation (5:24-25), but He'll summon enemies to come and smack Israel quickly.

Isaiah 6 is Isaiah's call into the Lord's service as His prophet. You would expect this in chapter 1, but here we are. There are many accounts of God calling His people into ministry. Moses, Ezekiel, John the Baptist (before he was born), and Jesus. This event is Isaiah's commissioning during King Uzziah's reign. If you recall, Uzziah was a remarkable king of Judah whose pride led to his downfall (2 Chronicles 26). Kings were not to infringe on the priests' work and vice versa. This infringement caused King Saul to lose his kingship (1 Samuel 13). I guess Uzziah didn't read that part of the History of the Kings. Anyway, Uzziah decided he would burn incense to the Lord on the Gold Incense Altar that stood directly before the Holy of Holies curtain. That's as close as a priest could get to God without getting struck down by the Lord's presence on the other side. It certainly wasn't a place for Israel's king. The example of Uzziah's punishment fits Isaiah's ministry. Isaiah was to call prideful Israel back to their God, to humble themselves and seek Him rather than pridefully and stubbornly pursue idols that catered to their base desires. Sadly, pride can blind and deafen people to God, which was Israel's condition.

What starts as a vision in the Temple turns into a full-blown vision of Yehovah on His throne (6:1-6). As dedicated to God as Isaiah was as a young man, he realized how sinful

he was compared to God Himself in whose presence he stood. But the Lord can fix that, and He does. A supernatural creature called a seraph (seraphim is plural, it has six wings) touches Isaiah's mouth with a coal from the altar signifying the Lord's forgiveness and cleansing. Isaiah is now ready to accept his divine commission, which he does.

Now, this cracks me up, and no. I'm not being irreverent. Isaiah's God-given ministry is to speak without anyone understanding what he's saying. Why would God do that? Because the people are so guilty, they deserve the punishment God decreed for them. But God follows justice and covenant processes. When a covenant is broken, the offended partner declares the other partner's infraction. Whether the partner grasps it or not, the offense is still legitimate, and justice must be done to right the wrong. God is rightly declaring Israel's guilt but blinding and deafening them, so there's no way they can repent. If they did, their covenant partner would be obligated to forgive them and move on. It's not time for that. Israel's sin is so bad a holy God has ruled it *must* be judged and punished. So, Isaiah's ministry is to declare the crime and the punishment to spiritually blind and deaf people. In other words, it's inevitable. Some people only learn through discipline. Isaiah knew his ministry would not lead God's people to repentance, but God would retrieve a remnant after the devastation. How long will Isaiah do this? Until God's judgment has desolated the land and emptied it of its people through exile.

INSIGHT

Sadly, we see the same sins of Isaiah's day in our day. Giant corporations are buying a multitude of homes, condos, and apartments to make them rental properties and jacking prices to line their pockets. Today, I see people who are party animals, brazen sinners, unethical, self-sufficient, and God-haters who willingly pervert justice for money. Look at the values our culture is teaching, calling good evil and evil good. It's so harsh and limiting to declare marriage as consisting of one man and one woman. Nope. That's evil. What's good is any number and combination of sex partners and gender swapping, and so forth.

Does God have judgment awaiting us? What makes us think He's changed since Isaiah's day?