

GENESIS ROAD PRESENTS...



a look at the picture of God
in every chapter of
the 21st book of the Bible

Chapter 1

GOD IS THE MEANING .

The last time I studied this book in a Bible study group, someone thought that Solomon would have been diagnosed with severe depression if he was living in today's world. Certainly, someone could read Ecclesiastes 1 and get that impression! But I'm not so sure. There's part of me that thinks Solomon—far from having a view of life that was *skewed* by depression—actually *got* it.

After all, he makes no secret about the motivation behind this book: “I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen *all the things* that are done *under the sun*; all of them are *meaningless*, a chasing after the wind.” (vs 12-14)

I think there is something important to note about this passage (and the entire book) right off the bat. Solomon says he is writing this commentary based on everything that is done *under the sun*. This is a key phrase in Ecclesiastes. Solomon uses it 29 times in this book, and it is not found anywhere else in the entire Bible. What it means is that Solomon (whether for philosophical or experiential reasons) is viewing and commenting on life *without God*. He is musing about human existence from the perspective that the universe ends at the sun.

And what is his conclusion? He begins the whole book with it: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is mean-

ingless.” (vs 2) What does humanity gain by their work? he asks. Generations rise up and fall away while the Earth constantly repeats its cyclical rhythms. No one can come up with anything new, and nobody is remembered after they're gone. It's all empty and meaningless.

And, of course, Solomon is right. When you remove God from life's equation, it *is* all empty and meaningless. If you don't know God, and especially if you don't know the kind of person He is, very little will seem to make sense in this life. Without God, things quickly turn dark, empty, and worthless.

The June 13, 2011 edition of *The New Yorker* included an article written by Aleksander Hemon titled, “The Aquarium: A child's isolating illness.” It is the heart-rending personal account of the ordeal Hemon and his wife went through in losing their year-old daughter, Isabel, to a rare brain cancer. Hemon's conclusion (which I initially read on a Facebook friend's wall) was this: “Isabel's suffering and death did nothing for her, or us, or the world. We learned no lessons worth learning; we acquired no experience that could benefit anyone. And Isabel most certainly did not earn ascension to a better place, as there was no place better for her than at home with her family. Without Isabel, Teri and I were left with oceans of love we could no longer dispense; we found ourselves with an excess of time that we used to devote to her; we had to live in a void that could be filled only by Isabel.”

When I found the article online and read it (which was nothing short of a traumatic experience, as Hemon is an extremely talented writer and pulls you right into the ordeal), I discovered that the one thing he and his wife would not allow anyone to talk to them about during Isabel's illness was God. They refused to see chaplains from the hospital. They made it clear to friends that God was not to be mentioned.

When I discovered that, it was not surprising to me that Hemon arrived at the conclusion he did—just as it shouldn't surprise us that Solomon arrived at the conclusion *he* did. Without God, *nothing* in this life makes sense. It is pointless to look for meaning outside of God, for *God is the meaning*. This is not to say that suffering—great or small—is *caused* by God, just that it will never make sense removed from Him.

And, if Solomon is to be believed, nothing else makes sense removed from Him, either—even the *good* stuff! For who was ever in a better position than Solomon to experience all this life *really* has to offer? He had enormous wealth, power, influence, wisdom, and popularity. He was in the best position to see all the world had to offer, to travel, to relax, to enjoy leisure, to do whatever he wanted. And at the end of a life filled with the very best, he still says, “It's empty. It's worthless. It didn't mean anything.”

So, no matter what your life holds right now—wealth and plenty of leisure time or wearisome burdens and brain cancer—do yourself a favor and *don't* take God out of the equation. Without Him, *everything* is meaningless. He *is* the meaning.

Chapter 2

GOD IS THE ONLY PLEASURE.

I think Solomon must never have heard his father's psalm that included this line: "You [God] make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Ps 16:11) Or maybe he did, and he decided to test-drive his father's theory. We may have everlasting pleasures at God's right hand, but can we find them without Him? That's what Solomon attempted to do, and he wrote about it in this chapter.

Have you ever said to yourself, *I'll be happy when...?* How would you finish that sentence? Do you think life would just be "perfect" if you were rich, had a job, lost some weight, were married, were single, could travel more, or have children? What are you "waiting for" so that you can start living? What are you "waiting for" that you are just *sure* will make you happy?

As I mentioned yesterday, nobody has ever been in a better position than Solomon to test out the theory of whether having "something else" would make you happy. He was very open and honest about his experiment: "I *denied myself nothing* my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil." (vs 10)

And let's find out how that worked out for him. Here's a list of everything Solomon said he attempted in the pursuit of happiness. He just "knew" he would be happy if:

- He laughed more. (vs 2)
- He partied and got drunk. (vs 3)
- He acquired real estate. (vs 4)
- He took up a hobby. (vs 4-6)
- He had other people to do his work. (vs 7)
- He bought a zoo. (vs 7)
- He acquired massive wealth. (vs 8)
- He went to every concert. (vs 8)
- He had all the sex he wanted. (vs 8)
- He did anything he wanted, whenever he wanted. (vs 10)

The result? "When I surveyed *all that my hands had done* and what I had toiled to achieve, *everything* was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." (vs 11) None of it meant anything. A lifetime of achievements and partying, and it all came to *nothing!*

Solomon learned firsthand that what his father had said was absolutely true—at the right hand of God are the eternal pleasures. Everything we do, everything we strive for . . . if it is not rooted *in Him*, you *will* discover one day that it has all been totally worthless. It will all blow away in the wind, and you will have absolutely *nothing*.

Don't limit your pursuits to only those that may be found "under the sun"! God wants you to have lasting happiness—and it is only found through a relationship with Him. He is the *only* pleasure.

Chapter 3

GOD MADE YOU FOR TODAY.

This chapter begins with one of my favorite poems—the “time” poem, that there is “a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” (vs 1) At the beginning of this chapter, it seems Solomon has briefly turned his gaze from things “under the sun” to a perspective of things “under the heavens.” And I believe he comes to some very beautiful conclusions:

Don’t worry. There is a time for everything. It is this way even when you love, maybe *especially* when you love. Because love is not something that always stays static or acts the same. It changes to meet the circumstances and the needs of the beloved. This can be confusing, because we know that God is Love (1 Jn 4:8) and also that He never changes (Mal 3:6). But this does not mean that His *methods* never change; it means His unfathomable *love* never changes. Thus, He will “build up” when love requires it and “tear down” when love requires it. Just as parents adapt their parenting methods (sometimes on a daily basis!) to meet the demands and needs of their ever-changing little ones, so God does this with us.

God makes everything beautiful. This *must* be an “under the heavens” perspective, because Solomon later identifies the “under the sun” perspective: “In the place of judgment—*wickedness* was there, in the place of justice—*wickedness* was there.” (vs 16) Many people look around at the state of things in the world and conclude that either God doesn’t exist or He is not good because evil seems to pre-

vail so often! But that’s only because, as Paul Harvey used to say, we don’t yet know *the rest of the story*. God’s power is expressed in redeeming suffering, in taking those things which were meant for evil and bringing good from them, in restoring all that which looks ugly into something amazing and beautiful. So no matter what awful things we see when we look around us (or within us!), God has promised (and He is able) to make all those things beautiful in His time.

Enjoy today. Today is all you have! You can’t go back and “redo” yesterday, and you may not be here tomorrow, so make sure you don’t miss out on today. Here’s how Solomon put it: “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.” (vs 12-13) Of course, when you’re thinking about making today as pleasurable as possible, you must not forget the lesson from yesterday’s chapter—that true pleasure is rooted in *God* and His plans for you. Don’t get so busy working for “tomorrow” that you miss out on all the opportunities God has for you today; *this* is the day the Lord has made, and He wants you to enjoy it!

You were made for eternity. This is related to the previous point. God has “set eternity in the human heart,” (vs 11) and guess what? Do you know how you live and experience eternity? *One day at a time!* In fact, eternity is not some distant promise. Peter

wrote that eternity starts now (1 Pet 1:3-5). You are living eternal life today! And that's how you will continue to live it—one day at a time.

God made you for today. He made you to enjoy today, with all its pursuits and *true* pleasures. No matter what you're facing today, He has promised that there is a time for everything and that everything *will be beautiful* in its time. So don't worry the day away.

This is one day in your eternal life that you will *never* live again. Make it a *great* one with God!

Chapter 4

GOD IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP.

We were made for community, to have relationships with each other. This is why God said in the beginning, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Gen 2:18) Of course, God was specifically talking about marriage in that context (which is very important!), but I believe God also made us for community and fellowship with one another.

This shouldn’t surprise us, because God *Himself* exists in a community, and He perpetuates His nature in His creation. Solomon wrote about that in this chapter: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (vs 9-12)

A cord of three strands. Isn’t that a beautiful description of the Trinity? The Father, the Son, and the Spirit exist in a community of three strands, and because God made *us* for relationship, it’s also a description of what *we* can be. Whether it’s marriage or friendship, when we enter into a relationship with another person and Christ is at the center of it, is it not a cord of three strands? This is precisely what God intended for us!

After thousands of years, it is *still* not good for humans to be alone. God has hardwired community into our hearts, so we not only have the innate de-

sire for companionship with each other, but also companionship with God. That’s because relationships are the only environment in which love may flourish. Since love is centered on others, it is not something that may be experienced in isolation, but must be experienced within a relationship.

Satan has worked very hard to destroy relationships on this Earth—family relationships, marital relationships, friendships, and even general community relationships. Everywhere you turn, there seems to be a general breakdown of wisdom in how to deal with others in community.

But God is *all about relationships*. And the more we surrender to Him, the more He can restore us into people who will be trustworthy in relationships. He wants us to be the cord of *three* strands. He wants us to be people who are not easily broken!

Chapter 5

GOD KEEPS HIS WORD.

I recently went to see the musical *Jersey Boys*. It's the story of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, and it's a pretty wild story! But nothing floored me more than the revelation that Frankie Valli and songwriter Bob Gaudio (who was, for a time, also one of the group's singers) have maintained for more than 40 years a personal partnership contract sealed with a *handshake*.

Shortly after becoming part of the group and meeting Valli, Gaudio realized he had a special singing talent and proposed a partnership. For the rest of their lives, they would promise to share the profits from their musical ventures 50/50—whatever Valli made from his singing and whatever Gaudio made from his songwriting. When Valli agreed and Gaudio suggested they draw up a contract, Valli extended his hand and said, "This is my contract." So they shook hands, and they are still partners to this day.

Wow! I was so impressed by that. I recently entered into a partnership of my own, and I must tell you that by the time all the legal wrangling was over, my head was swimming. Call me naive, but my heart resonates more with the "handshake" sort of contract. I know there are a great many people in the world who *aren't* this way, but as far as I'm concerned, when I say I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it. And I'm not going to do it because I signed my name on a piece of paper. I'm going to do it because I said I would.

This is what God is like. He keeps His word. He doesn't keep it because some court is going to enforce a document He signed. He keeps it because that's the kind of person He is!

That's why Solomon wrote, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God . . . It is better *not to make a vow* than to make one and not fulfill it." (vs 2, 5) Oh, how life would be different if there were more people who kept their word, more people who valued their promise more than their signature.

God can be trusted to do what He says. He always keeps His word.

Do you?

Chapter 6

GOD ALONE IS GOOD.

I think Solomon hit on something *extremely* important in this chapter. It would seem he's been building up to it for six chapters, running through lists of nearly *everything* that can be experienced in this life and calling all of it *meaningless*—wealth, poverty, wisdom, folly, justice, injustice, toil, laziness, and so on.

As I've been reading, I've thought to myself more than once, *How can both opposites be meaningless? How can wisdom and folly be meaningless? Shouldn't we desire one and not the other? Or desire neither? If they're both meaningless, what does it matter which one we have?*

The key, I believe, is in verse 12 of this chapter: "For who knows *what is good for a person* in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?" There, Solomon just said it right out in the open: *We are not in a position to determine what is "good" or "bad" for us.* After all, if a person can have "wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire" (vs 2) and *still* not find satisfaction and meaning in life, can we say that wealth, possessions and honor for *that person* are "good"?

Here's the truth: It's time for us to stop deciding what is "good" and "bad" for us and choose to trust that only *God* is *good*. And not only is *He* good, but He always does what He knows is best for us. Now, please listen carefully: Nobody will *ever* want

better things for you and your life than *God* wants for you. You can trust yourself *fully* to Him!

So, who knows what is good for you in life? *God knows!*

Only He is good.

Chapter 7

GOD KNOWS THE WAY TO JOY.

A few days ago, I quoted from an article written by Aleksandar Hemon about the death of his little girl, Isabel. The paragraph I quoted began with a sentence that, at the time, I left out, but I will quote now: “One of the most despicable religious fallacies is that suffering is ennobling—that it is a step on the path to some kind of enlightenment or salvation.” Now, I don’t know about suffering being a step toward salvation, but I’m not sure I’m ready to agree that suffering is *not* ennobling.

Not only is there Biblical evidence to the contrary (which we will examine from today’s chapter), but more importantly for me, I *know* that suffering is ennobling from personal experience. Of course, I would never go up to any grieving person and tell them to “buck up” because suffering is ennobling. Nor would I say that the fact that suffering is ennobling diminishes the pain and sorrow that suffering causes.

To recognize that suffering can and often does result in profound spiritual growth should never make light of the sufferer’s experience. Jesus might have known that He was in control of everything when it came to the cross (Jn 10:18), but that didn’t mean that His suffering wasn’t real and painful and awful. However, He endured the suffering of the cross for the sake of . . . joy: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy set before him* endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb 12:2)

The suffering of Jesus led Him to joy. And that’s exactly what Solomon said about suffering in today’s chapter: “Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us.” (vs 3) That’s sort of counter-intuitive, isn’t it? We would naturally think that being happy is what would cause refinement. But the truth is (at least in my own life) that some of my most sorrowful days have been amongst my best days. In fact, when I lived with my parents to help care for my father as he was dying, my mom and I would sometimes stand in the kitchen, look at each other and say, “These are good days.” And somehow, they were.

In his commentary on this verse, F.B. Meyer wrote, “When the face is wreathed with smiles, and we trip lightly over meadows bespangled with spring flowers, our heart is often running to waste. The soul which is always jovial and carefree misses the deepest life. It has its reward, and it is satisfied to its measure, though that measure is a very scanty one. But the heart is dwarfed, and the nature, which is capable of the highest heights, the deepest depths, is undeveloped; and life presently burns down to its socket *without having known the resonance of the deepest chords of joy.*”

Is it possible that, for us (as for Jesus), the way to joy is *through* the cross? Is this why Jesus asked us to take up our cross and follow Him? We don’t want to take up a cross! We want to avoid the cross, sidestep it, go around it, leap over it . . . but what if the only way to joy is to go *through* it?

Could that be the reason Jesus said, “*Blessed* are those who mourn”? (Matt 5:4) Could that be why Peter said, “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But *rejoice* that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, *so that you may be overjoyed* when his glory is revealed”? (1 Pet 4:12-13)

Could that be the reason Paul wrote, “We pray that you’ll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and *spills over into joy*, thanking the Father who makes us *strong enough* to take part in everything *bright and beautiful* that he has for us”? (Col 1:11-12)

I want Aleksandar Hemon to find some of the glory-strength that God gives. I want him to know that Isabel’s story is not over and that he will see her again—healthy and well—when God shows us how He has made everything bright and beautiful.

In that sense, then, perhaps it’s not quite right to say that *suffering* is ennobling, but more accurate to say that *God* is ennobling. He knows the way to joy, and He knows how to get us there—even if the path must go through a Gethsemane garden and a Calvary cross. As we take up our cross to follow Jesus, we can know that the same joy that was set before Him is set before us. All we must do is fix our eyes on Him, for He knows the way.

Chapter 8

GOD IS IN CONTROL.

In this chapter, Solomon continues his theme that life isn't fair: "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: *the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.* This too, I say, is meaningless. So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun." (vs 14-15)

This, of course, is nothing new. Solomon's father, David, asked, "Why do the wicked prosper?" more than once. Seems like nothing had changed very much, and looking around at today's world, it seems like things are pretty much the same. Yet the general belief that "good" things should happen to "good" people and "bad" things should happen to "bad" people still persists. If it didn't, why would we be puzzled when "bad" things happen to "good" people?

Things in this world just aren't that tidy. Although we think it should work differently, often those who are most wicked seem to enjoy the most prosperity. But I think that consideration carries an important lesson, one that Solomon may have been trying to get at: The reason to be righteous is *not* because it brings some sort of external reward—such as a prolonged life.

If you're being righteous because you believe you're going to "get" something out of it, you may want to stop and consider if that's really righteous-

ness in the first place! If the only reason you've signed up for righteousness is because you think that's how you will get to the "good" life here on earth, you might want to think again. Rather, Solomon says, you may just end up getting what the wicked "deserve" instead.

That's when it's helpful to remember that God is in control. Often, it can look to us like evil is running rampant and has taken over the place—dishing out "bad" stuff to the "good" people and *vice versa*. But God is still in control. He is still in His heaven, and all is right on time in His universe.

So, if you've signed up for righteousness only to get a certain short-term reward, you may be disappointed. Righteousness *does* have its rewards—but they are often not the ones we anticipate! So, if you feel like you're living a righteous life and reaping the rewards of the wicked instead, trust God with that. He is still in control, and He is working out the best good He can for *everyone*—even those wicked people who have already gotten what *you* "deserved"!

Chapter 9

GOD IS IN CONTROL, PART TWO.

Just in case we didn't get the message in chapter 8 yesterday, Solomon continues to drive home the point about having little control over the things that happen to us in life: "The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all." (vs 11)

Time and chance happen to them all. In other words, at some point, all of us will suffer. That's really the salient point, here, isn't it? I mean, nobody cares about or complains when "good" things befall them. If we won the lottery, we wouldn't sigh and say, "Well, time and chance happen to everyone." We only think things like that when things don't work out as we "expect" them to—when the swift *don't* win the race, when the strong *don't* win the battle, when the brilliant *don't* find wealth.

Suffering comes to every person in some way at some time. On this sinful planet, there is no getting around it. But there is a fundamental blessing in suffering, and it's this: *Suffering exposes the myth that we are in control of our lives.* Most of us believe this very thing most of the time—that we are ultimately in control of our lives. And suffering, whenever and wherever we encounter it, blows that myth to smithereens. Why? Because if we really *were* in control of our lives, we would *never* elect to suffer!

That time and chance happen to us all should wake us up to the reality that we are not *really* in control of this day. Now, you may have woken up with

plans for the day, but whether you'll end the day as you have planned actually remains to be seen. There are a million things that could happen to you today that are outside of the plan you made for yourself. Face it: you actually have *no idea* what your day will hold!

You may not know, but there is someone who does. God knows. He knows what will happen to you today—whether things will proceed as you imagine or whether they won't. *Nothing* catches Him off-guard. This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes by the great Holocaust survivor, Corrie Ten Boom: "There is no panic in Heaven! God has no problems, only plans."

God is not surprised when unexpected things come your way. He has a plan, and in fact, His plan is always right on schedule. Be thankful for all the things—yes, even suffering—that remind you of that!

So, if you're staring down "time and chance" today, take heart.

You're not in control, and you don't have to be.

And if you're *not* staring down "time and chance" today, it may not be long before you are.

Relax.

God's got it all under control.

Chapter 10

GOD TAKES THE LONG WAY HOME.

Solomon begins this chapter with an interesting proverb: “As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.” (vs 1) He’s saying that it takes *far more* energy to create something beautiful than it does to muck it up. And unfortunately, in this world, there are people who would rather spend their time going around tearing things down than building things up.

I’m sorry, did I say, *in this world*? I didn’t mean to single out this behavior as something that *only* happens “under the sun.” Actually, this behavior got its start *long* ago, in a place *far* away: “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.” (Rev 12:7-9)

My father used to use a quote of Don Snyder’s in his wedding homilies—that we could all wish to be preceded in this world by a love story. But the universal truth about this world is that *it* was preceded by a *war* story. Satan decided to be a dead fly in God’s heavenly ointment, and he quickly mucked up what—up to that point—had been nothing but beauty and harmony. It didn’t take very long to destroy the paradise God had created.

I suppose, when faced with such a situation, the easiest thing to do is to throw out the batch of

dead-fly-perfume and start over again. And God certainly could have done that very thing with His rebellious children. When Adam and Eve decided to join the rebellion in the Garden of Eden, He could have wiped out the Earth and started over with it, too.

But He didn’t.

Instead, God took the long way. He committed Himself to undoing the damage that had been caused so quickly and carelessly—no matter the cost. Instead of throwing out the baby with the bathwater (or, in this case, the dead flies with the perfume), God has done what it takes to *restore* the perfume to its original condition. Actually, more incredible than that, He is somehow making it *better* than it was to begin with.

God takes the long way home. He has never taken the easy way out. He has never shirked an ounce of responsibility—even when the mess wasn’t *His* to clean up in the first place! He is in this for the long haul. He is totally committed to you, to me, to the human race, and to His universe at large. He will do whatever it takes to restore the beauty and harmony of the paradise He created.

Chapter 11

GOD GIVES THE ABUNDANT LIFE.

How, then, shall we live? Solomon has spent a whole lot of time despairing about the condition of this world—how many things are empty and meaningless and random! He says we don't have control over our lives, and much of what we do goes either unnoticed or unrewarded. So, we must come to this question: How, then, shall we live?

And Solomon's answer in this chapter seems to be, "Be bold! Be joyful! Do what's right!" Nobody knows how many days, months, or years they will live on this Earth, but each day, we may *decide* to do those three things: be bold, be joyful, and do what's right.

1. Be bold. Solomon suggests taking every opportunity you have to work hard and invest: "Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land . . . Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." (vs 1-2, 6)

2. Be joyful. Don't wait until some other time to enjoy your life. *Enjoy today!* This is how Solomon put it: "You who are young, be happy *while you are young*, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth." (vs 9a) Often, it is so easy for us to "put off" living until some conditions we've set up in our mind are met. Don't wait! Live today!

3. Do what's right. However, Solomon qualified verse 9 with this admonition: "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (vs 9b) Nobody knew better than Solomon that all of our choices have consequences. So, while you're being joyful and following your heart, remember to let it lead you to a place of integrity, honesty, and righteous living. Anything else will eventually unravel and destroy that joyful spirit! Be careful what you do with your freedom.

God has always been interested in helping us live the abundant life. Long before Jesus came and said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10), God was speaking through His prophets to help us understand how we can get the most out of the days we have on Earth.

Today's advice? Be bold! Be joyful! Do what's right! Seize the day with these principles in your heart, and—no matter what today holds—you *will* live it abundantly in the freedom of God's spirit. Truly, it is the *only* way to live!

Chapter 12

GOD IS WORTH IT.

It's interesting, isn't it? Solomon traveled the world, tasted every delight, sampled every pleasure, and denied himself *nothing*. And at the end of it all, he was left to conclude that all was empty and meaningless, except for this: "Have reverence for God, and obey his commands, because this is all that we were created for." (vs 13)

It's hard to believe that a person could live the richest and most privileged life possible and come to *that* conclusion, but I bet if we followed in Solomon's footsteps, we'd eventually find ourselves at that very place.

An atheist friend of mine recently asked me how I knew for sure that there was such a thing as eternal life in heaven. What if it's not true? he wondered. I immediately thought of the lyrics to that great gospel song, *If Heaven Never Was Promised To Me*, and realized (for me) just how true they are:

*You may ask me why I serve the Lord.
Is it just for heaven's gain?
Or to walk those mighty streets of gold,
And to hear the angels sing?
Is it just to drink from the fountain
That never shall run dry?
Or just to live forever in that sweet ol' by and by?*

*But if heaven never was promised to me,
Neither God's promise to live eternally,
It's been worth having the Lord in my life.
Livin' in a world of darkness, but He brought me the light.*

If there is no such place as heaven and if there is no such thing as life after death, I would *still* choose to live this life with the Lord. To me, the value of knowing Him and the value of the gospel is not pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by or the idea that there is some reward waiting for me when I'm done here. No, the true value of knowing Him and the value of the gospel is what it brings to my life *right now*. It is the value of my friendship with Him. It is the blessed experience of loving and being loved in return.

The power of the gospel is *not* that it promises a change of circumstances in the future! The power of the gospel is that it changes me in the midst of my circumstances *right now*! Living life with God in the here and now is worth it—even if this life is the only one I get to spend with Him.

For at the end of the day, there is *nothing* "under the sun" that can begin to compare with the quality of life we find when we have reverence for God and obey Him. Trying to live life any other way is a denial of all that we were made for!