

# Grace for the Day

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

## Ecclesiastes – Devotional (Day 22 – 31)

By Rev. Peter Eng

### Day 22 Limitations

Ecclesiastes 9:13-16

*"He saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man."*

Wisdom works. Though at certain points, the Teacher seems to deprecate wisdom, he is not saying that wisdom is of no use. It is powerful. But it has its limitations. He relates to us what he saw concerning a poor wise man in the city. He saved the city, but his accomplishment was not remembered. The credit probably went to the rich and powerful.

The one who has wisdom, and who accomplishes much through his wisdom and work has to be realistic that his contributions may not be remembered, and others may rob him of the credit. This happens everywhere, even in churches. I know of a person who planted a church, and spent years laboring for it. But the ones who took over did a systematic job of erasing his name from the history of how that church was founded.

"Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good." The wise should not tag his enjoyment of life onto his wisdom. It may indeed bring him

grief. The effectiveness of wisdom is not the issue. The point that the Teacher is examining is whether or not wisdom helps us enjoy life.

This discourse tells us that wisdom is essential for life itself, but for life to be enjoyed, one cannot limit oneself to the pursuit of wisdom. God made man with five senses, and all these senses may be lawfully employed to enjoy life. God did not intend all believers to be brainy intellectuals who are divorced from normal human passions.

The wise man, who saved the city, must have wished for some recognition, but received none. While wisdom may bring with it some measure of pain or disappointment, it becomes folly to dwell on the lack of recognition. If you have done good work that has gone unrecognized, or if your credit has been stolen from you, continue to enjoy life. Find enjoyment in the work itself whatever the reward may be.

*That: Enjoy the work, whatever the returns.*

**Day 23****The Whole Man**

Ecclesiastes 9:17-10:3

*"As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor."*

There was a boy from a little village in India who made it good. He went to England to study and eventually became a world renowned neurosurgeon. He was very well respected and much sought after. At the height of his popularity, and in his travels, he happened to be near his hometown. He decided to visit the town he held so dear to his heart. When he returned, and after lengthy identifications, one elder in the village brightened with recognition. "Oh, you are the little boy who dammed the brook that summer long ago!"

We seem to remember only the good we do, and others seem to remember only wrongs in our lives. That is a reality we cannot change. It is good that we live our lives carefully. But it is difficult to be beyond blame or criticism. Since we must live with this human penchant to find fault in us, what are we to do? In fact, this same tendency in us also robs us of joy in living. When we remember our friends, do we remember them for the blessing they have been to us or for the wrongs they did to us? Do we best remember their virtues or their vices?

To enjoy life, we need to lower our expectations of what others think of us. Most of us think that we are better liked than in reality. We like to think that our contributions are remembered. The reality often points in a different direction. On our part we can lose friends when we become critical of their actions. We find their weaknesses intolerable, and we lose these friends.

The Teacher tells us that to enjoy life, we need to look at the people around us as whole persons. Is he one who inclines his heart to do right? He may not be consistent (neither are we), and he would fail many times. He may have traits that you do not like, and may hurt you at times. But on the whole, is he correctly inclined? When we see that a little vice discounts much virtue, we need to have a realistic self-esteem and a holistic view of others.

*Thot: Be patient, God is not finished with us yet.*

## Day 24

### Dumb Boss

Ecclesiastes 10:4-7

*“There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler.”*

Bad governments give occasion for bad situations to thrive. There are certain evils that come about primarily due to an evil government, or a bad boss. These are part of life, and our enjoyment of life does not depend on a good government or a good boss.

The first social oddity, if not absurdity, is that fools occupy high positions, and the rich occupy the low. When this is said, we need to quickly add that this has nothing to do with office in the church. Many people lament that the rich and the educated are the ones holding church office, and the lowly have no place. In our political situation, we may justly fear that the rich dominate only to fill their own coffers from public funds. But we need to know that the Teacher is speaking of a political situation. The best real life example of the stupidity described in this verse is what happened in communist China. Fools are assigned high positions on the basis of their ideological leanings rather than their ability. Factories were manned by the political faithful rather than the competent.

The same danger is seen in conservative churches. Each denomination has a set of distinctive denominational doctrines. It is a sad day when leaders in a denomination place in high positions those who learn

to parrot the few phrases that please them.

When princes go on foot and slaves ride on horses, it tells us that good sense has taken leave. It is not wrong for slaves to ride, or for princes to walk, but this expression means that the capable and deserving have been forced to exchange places with those who do not qualify. In work, it is the situation when another person gets the reward for our labors.

The Christian principles that govern such situations is that we change what we can and accept what we cannot change. This is the duality of exercising our human responsibility and accepting the sovereignty of God.

*Thot: The wise will not be surprised by injustice.*

**Day 25****Work Smart**

Ecclesiastes 10:8-11

*"Whoever digs a pit may fall into it."*

There are some who wonder why God isn't with them in their daily living. By that they mean why things seem to go wrong all the time. In comparison to their non-Christian colleagues, things always go wrong for them while their non-Christian friends seem to do well.

There was this person who wanted to give up on God because he gets the worst deal in everything. Since I know him personally, I realized that what he expected God to do was to cover up his blunders. He is particularly careless, and has a bad attitude towards work and people. He could never hold a job for he either botched everything up or quarreled with everyone. In a minor way, we may, every now and then, hear ourselves asking why things don't seem to go right.

The Teacher tells us that at work we need to take care. That is part of wisdom in living, and part of enjoying life. If we blunder through life, we cannot expect to enjoy it. Whatever we do may carry with it some risk. It is therefore our duty to exercise caution. Even in ordinary duties, like digging a pit (part of farming), in breaking a wall (part of construction), in quarrying, or in lumbering, one may get hurt. When

a person does become a casualty of carelessness, can he blame God for his injury? There are some who think they are tough when they refuse to wear a hard hat on a construction site, or goggles when they drill metal. The one who wants to enjoy life will not swagger through his work as though he was charmed.

At work, we face many less-than-ideal conditions. The woodsman who is armed with a blunt axe will naturally find it a handicap at work. But if he were to use skill, he can still overcome that handicap. He is called upon to adapt to adverse circumstances. Many who do not enjoy life complain of how difficult it is for them to do a job, and of all the natural advantages that another person may have. Instead of focusing on how they can enjoy their work by overcoming the obstacles, they concentrate on the obstacles and make themselves miserable.

*Thot: There is no joy in foolish work.*

**Day 26****Worthless Words**

Ecclesiastes 10:12-14

*"At the beginning his words are folly, at the end, they are wicked madness—and the fool multiplies words."*

Have you been confronted by a con man? He starts off with a story that wrenches your heart. He asks for help and you give. Or there may be one who tells you that your loved one is hurt or in danger, and your help is needed. He makes it sound as though he is doing you a favor by informing you, and you give because you believe him.

Whenever you speak to a person with such a story, all you have to do is to get him to keep talking. If his story is true, the little details will be consistent. But if he is a swindler, more often than not, he will begin to contradict himself, or say things that do not match the facts. When you point out his folly, he multiplies words to mask the matter.

Wisdom dictates that we ought to beware of those who change their story. In many life situations, we have promises made to us that are not fulfilled. The person who made the promise adds to his folly by multiplying his words. In a conflict, each party has his points, but the one who is untruthful begins to change his story to add strength to his case. If we were to listen more

carefully and evaluate the data presented, we will discover subtle changes. "New data" is presented and points of reference change. Let the fool talk on, and he will be consumed by his own words. It is always easier to tell the truth.

This applies to each of us. On the one hand, we need to exercise discernment when we hear words poured out, on the other, we need to restrain ourselves from coloring the facts to strengthen our case. Gracious words come from a gracious heart. There can be no righteousness when our words are words of venom and hurt. And at the end of the day, we do not know how useful or useless our words are, for "No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him?"

*That: Careless words do not yield a care-free life.*

**Day 27****Money**

Ecclesiastes 10:15-20

*"But money is the answer for everything."*

Many years ago, I was shown this verse, and was completely stumped. As a young Christian, I was aware of verses like "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." We are constantly warned against filthy lucre and the likes of it. Suddenly, there is a verse in the Bible that seems to say the exact opposite. What am I to make of it? In fact, it is verses like these that made me avoid reading Ecclesiastes.

We can understand this verse when we see that this section extols the virtue of work. The lazy fool pretends not to know the way to town. The land suffers if she has rulers who indulge. The lazy man sees his house in ruins. And finally, money is the answer to everything.

There are many opinions on the meaning of this verse, but I feel that the explanation should be tied in to the theme on the virtue of work. In this regard, Martin Luther's explanation seems to stand out. His translation of this verse reads, "das Geld muss alles zuwege bringen." This means "money is needed to procure everything."

This verse is saying that part of the enjoyment of life is in feasting,

laughter, and wine. But money is needed to procure everything (for feasting and wine). It is legitimate to enjoy the good things of life. At the same time, the one who wishes to enjoy the pleasures of life has to first work (make money), without which he has not earned the right to feast.

There are those who envy the lot of others when they party. There are those who wish to live like the successful even before they succeed. Material prosperity is to be enjoyed, and the Christian does not need to apologize for his success or for enjoying the fruit of his labor. The problem is that too many look at the enjoyment that others have and become envious, or think that is their lot in life when they have not labored for it. We are asked to enjoy our work and to enjoy the fruit of our labor. Both are from the Lord.

*Thot: Nothing without work.*

**Day 28**  
**Make Money**

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

*"Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed...or whether both will do equally well."*

This must be one of the most unusual passages in the Bible. I believe this passage tells us how to make money. Some think that the acquisition of wealth is incompatible with our faith. But God is not against wealth. It is our attitude to wealth that is critical. If we wish to enjoy life, money must never be the goal in our life. It is an instrument through which we may lawfully enjoy life. If it is a lawful channel, there ought to be recommendations on how it may be justly acquired. This is what we have here.

"Cast your bread upon the waters" is an expression for seaborne trade. What we have here is the farmer told to move out of his little niche and invest in trade. But he must not be greedy for the reward will come only "after many days." He must divide his investments into many small portions, or in modern day terms: "to diversify," because he cannot know when or where disaster may strike.

Income from investment is good and right. But he must detach himself from his investment and concentrate on his daily work as a farmer. He should continue to sow his seed in the morning, and in the evening, to utilize his time to invest.

There are some who become emotionally tied down to their investments. When they invest, they cannot concentrate on their work. The Teacher reminds us that investment is for the idle hours. The investment must not distract us from our work. There are some Christians who feel that investment is wrong. That is clearly in contradiction to the Bible. (There are other passages like multiplying your talent.) What they may be saying is that when they invest, they lose appetite for gainful labor. If such is the case, he is the weaker brother, not the more holy one. But we do well to note that if we are the weaker brother, it is better not to invest than to participate when investments shift our true value from God to gain.

*Thot: If investment cannot be your slave, do not make him your master.*

**Day 29****Youth and Vitality**

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8

*"Follow the ways of your heart...but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment."*

As long as you are still able to read this page, you are young. Light is sweet. Age dims the eye and soon we shall not be able to see many things. Given the advances in the treatment of cataracts and other eye problems, we can keep seeing much longer than people during Solomon's time. But the time will still come to us, when we can no longer see. Remember, the days of darkness will come. Redeem the time of our youth.

"What do you like?" the Teacher asks. "Pursue it!" he says. Within the limits of health, life and death, the mysteries of the world, the oppression that goes on around us, the lack of fulfillment in achievements, what do we desire? The starting point of enjoyment in life is the life of faith. It is to see all that is happening to us at this point in time as God's sovereign plan for us. This is how we begin the life of faith.

We begin the life of enjoyment, which is also the life of faith, by looking to the end of that life and see that after our sojourn on earth, we are answerable to God. This provides direction and defines for us

the corridor along which we are called to progress. The world lays at our feet. Too many of us treat the world as our enemy. It is true that the world system is our enemy, but the material world was created "very good" (Gen 1:31) for man to enjoy. When we think of the physical world as evil, we begin to think that material things are not compatible with our faith. It is materialism that denies God, not material possessions.

There is a fine balance in our life. We are called to a whole-hearted faith in Christ Jesus. We find in him all we need. In the midst of oppression or in times of success, Christ is our focus. In him we find joy, and life is enjoyable regardless of our station in life. We may want to set certain earthly targets to achieve (like doing well in school, at work, in business etc.). But all these are conditioned by the judgment to come.

*That: Enjoyment in life is conditioned by judgment from God.*

**Day 30****Wise Input**

Ecclesiastes 12:9-12

*"The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd."*

"You are what you eat." The more we eat, the bigger we become. When we eat healthily, we stay in better health. As in the physical realm, so the spiritual. We are what we imbibe.

Go into any bookstore and see the endless supply of ink on paper. What should we read? There is no person on earth who can read all that is written. And not all that is written is worth reading! The process of selection comes in. If we will spend time studying how to select, we will save time going through all that we should not have selected. The starting point of wisdom is to look for it in the right place.

We all want to enjoy life. Into the pool of life, we plunge and try to swim. Many drown. The Teacher tells us that the correct place to start is right here in Ecclesiastes, in the Bible, which is "given by one Shepherd." Our thoughts and processes are to be conditioned by the revealed will of God.

This is difficult when we find that we are under a boss who is secular. We

are to learn the skills of the trade from him. But in the process, he will pass on his philosophy of life which he says is the thing that made him successful. Because we are still learning, we sometimes ingest the bad with the good. In the military, strength, toughness, and courage, are associated with vulgarity, drinking, womanizing, callousness, and bravado. In sales, success is associated with lies, entertainment, carousing, and bribes.

Beware! There is no profession without pitfalls and dangers. Some have more pitfalls than others, but we fall in either by choice or by carelessness. From day to day, we are bombarded by contrary values and practices. We seek out books that help us in our jobs, we listen to advice on how we can be successful. It is surely time for us to listen to how we can truly and fully enjoy life, which is to enjoy it as the life of faith.

*That: Feed heartily on the Word and live robustly in the world.*

## Day 31 Conclusion

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

*"Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this are the whole duty of man."*

Those who teach in schools will know that children forget to bring their books to school, forget to do their homework, forget to about everything they ought to remember. Conversely, they never forget when there is a holiday, when they are promised a treat, when they go for a picnic or a hike.

What we see is not childishness. It is human nature. There are things we are naturally prone to do. We do not need much encouragement in those. As a child does not have to be told repeatedly that he is going for an outing, we do not need to be told to enjoy life. As the child has to be told how to have a safe and enjoyable outing, we need to be told how to have a safe and enjoyable life.

We come to the end of Ecclesiastes all ready to take on life and to live it to the full. Before we take the plunge to luxuriate in the warmth of life and vitality, we need to be reminded once more that there are dangers in the pool. We need to know that "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

Many of us know the God-given guidelines, in varying degrees of understanding. These form the limits of the highway we are to travel in a life of enjoyment, and, of peace with God. We are discouraged from going into the byways by the Teacher who tells us that they are all meaningless. But the thing that will motivate us to keep from

wandering into the byways is when we have the fear of the Lord.

When we live our life in the midst of greed and perversity, we need to formulate a lifestyle that is enjoyable but does not conform to the world. Recently, I had to work on how I can prevent the name of Jesus Christ from being a swear word among a group of people. What great joy I had when the Lord gave me occasion to defend his name in a way that was received by the people. Enjoy life, fear God.

*That: Bend the rules and break your life!*

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.