

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 1 May 2012

“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Ecclesiastes 1, verses 1 and 2

How far do you have to go to begin a journey? Can you start a journey where you are or do you have to do something special? Do you need to go to Troy and stare at the face of the lady so she can launch your thousand ships? Does your journey begin at the curly cue center of that road paved in yellow bricks? When you start a journey, do you plan ahead for weeks, gradually getting everything ready? Is your journey to go on vacation, or to run The Amazing Race, or perhaps to run across country like Forrest Gump? Do you have to venture far to begin a brand new journey? Or do you simply turn a page?

The book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of reflections on life. It talks about the vanity of life, and how life is a journey. If you want to know half of what the book says, it's contained fully in these first two verses. These two verses – words that identify the credibility of the author and lay out the theme of the book – spell out everything you need to know about what King Solomon thought of humanity's plight. Son of David, king in Jerusalem, tradition holds that King Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. Tradition, therefore, placed the book on the next page after the Proverbs ends. Open your Bible to see for yourself.

Of course that means a couple of things. One, even with a month's break, we didn't venture very far. Curse me if you will for a lack of originality, but much prayer went into where to go now. When God speaks, I've come to understand it's best to listen, so Ecclesiastes is where we start today. And, two, even if it was written after the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes provides a fitting commentary, a necessary coda, on all those common sense chunks of advice that God imparted through Solomon. The Proverbs spend thirty-one chapters talking about all kinds of good maxims to get us through the daily trials of life. It's very much a book of “how and “what.” Or, as Prince said, “dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this think called ‘life.’”

Oh no, let's go.

That's quite a lot to fit all into a single page. But you see, that page does so for a reason. It's the start of a new journey. When the wisest man in history wrote these words he was divinely inspired to do so. He had been granted a request, a wish if you will, by God Himself. “Ask for anything and it will be given to you,” had said the Almighty. Rather than asking for a harem, a mountain of gold, a Mercedes or even an Xbox 360, the young king asked for wisdom. He could have had it all but he asked to know more, to discern in a Godly manner. Do you think God was pleased at that? I'm sure He must have been because God already knew that Solomon was on a journey. Solomon didn't know where that journey would go...but God did.

And for the start of it, He granted Solomon the wisdom that many men take years to carefully discern. Through all that wisdom, the best Solomon could say about the human condition was that, on its own, it was meaningless. Totally, utterly, completely, fully in every way: the world is one hundred percent meaningless. Left alone, our condition then and now was without hope, without real purpose, lacking in love. And here's the really twisted part of it all: this observation, this wise insight from the wisest man who ever lived, is the start of an expression of truly divine love.

Welcome back, my friends. Oh no, let's go.

Does this mean that the book of Ecclesiastes is a downer, a real drag? Is it going to be like slogging through your taxes (which I hope you paid a few weeks ago), a book by Ayn Rand, or watching anything with Pauly Shore (or Pauly D)? Is the book a list of grievances and platitudes, like so much of the Bible seems to be; those things that only the good people live up to? Is the book a set of baby rides when we're all queued up to ride the Texas Giant?

I think it's actually that rollercoaster and rollercoaster's are rarely boring or a drag. Just the other day, my wife and I were talking about one of our favorite movies, "Parenthood." There's a scene we both remember, where Steve Martin's grandmother is recounting how life can be like a merry go round or it can be like a rollercoaster. The carousel just goes around in a circle; it doesn't really take you anyplace. Not so the rollercoaster. That takes you up and down, fast, slow; it goes some place and it thrills you.

Is your life a merry go round or do you want something more? I'll take the rollercoaster any day. Ditto my wife, and we're in the company of Solomon. The rollercoaster is a journey, and so is the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a journey that starts by recognizing perhaps the most fundamental truth in all of human history: left on our own, all by our lonesome, everything in the world is meaningless. Left to our own devices, we board the carousel and simply go around in circles, thinking we're riding a fast steed and really moving along. But when you take off the blinders, you're just following the guy in front of you as he goes nowhere fast. That's no way to live out a journey, and you know as well as I do that your life is a journey. It's a linear path you've traveled from all the places you walked through in your yesterdays to get you to where you are today, reading these words.

You're on a journey, and you've probably been riding the rollercoaster. And if you stop to think about it, without something of real meaning in your life, all those days and all that up and down is really pretty meaningless. Neither you nor I are kings, and I'm betting neither of us is the wisest person of our age. We're a couple of average people, trying to do our best, living our lives the best way we know how. If that's as good as it gets, the rollercoaster has stopped and the power has run out. It's pretty meaningless. You're no better to stay on than you are to get off. Do I hear the calliope?

And yet, in God, the journey continues. We acknowledge that here, just like Solomon did. Everything is meaningless...everything, that is, except what matters most. Buckle up: there are hills and thrills just up ahead. How far do you have to go to begin a journey? My friend, you're already on it. As we begin, remember what Bob Seger sang: here I am, turn the page.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 2 May 2012

What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1, verse 3.

Happy Wednesday, meaning that if you are reading this, you survived Monday and Tuesday. I don't hate work. I really don't. In fact, at the end of a lot of turmoil, these days I actually look forward to work. That hasn't always been the case. Like so many others, I've worked in jobs I didn't like, even some where I dreaded going to the office. Not so these days. Through many years of hard work, struggling, working my way through new situations, and seven different companies, I'm finally working in a company where I'm satisfied. I like what I do, I'm paid well for it, and I find meaning in it. I reject all that claptrap about "the man is trying to keep you down" and how business has it out for the little guy. That's simply envy talking.

The truth is that we were made for work. You can't believe the whole creation story without seeing that God put man in the garden with a purpose. God empowered Adam with the awesome privilege and responsibility to make it flourish. He didn't tell Adam "here, pal, walk around buck naked and just check on things now and then." God gave Adam work, knowing that He had made man to thrive under God's purposes. God Himself had worked to make all things. It's work to speak things into existence? If that isn't so, you try it! God understood that work could bring us satisfaction because He had been satisfied with all the work He'd done in creation.

Work is a blessing. So why did King Solomon say it was a whole bunch of nothing?

Solomon came to that conclusion because he was wise and understood the nature of work. If a man toils for years under the sun without hope, faith and love, then at the end of his years the only thing awaiting him is a grave. That's what the verse is saying. It's no coincidence that the verse comes on the heels of the declaration that all things are meaningless. All things are indeed meaningless, including our life-long vocation, if we work from the wrong attitude and heart.

Thus it is that you can go to school for your entire life and if the pursuit of knowledge is your only motivation, then your work will have been in vain and your life will have had no real meaning. You'll walk away knowing nothing of any real value.

Thus it is that you can work as an overpaid healthcare consultant and if your work is your only focus, then all your work is in vain and your purpose was radically misplaced. Besides, the government is taking it over anyway. But I digress.

Thus it is that you can preach magnificently, be a tremendous motivational speaker, even a brilliant encourager, and if you don't preach God's love in Christ then all your beautiful words are rubbish. That's something with which I struggle.

Thus it is that you can work all your life to become president and, when you're there, if you don't have real hope, then all the change in the world won't leave you feeling satisfied at night and your entire career will have been a waste. You won't realize that real power doesn't come from the Oval Office.

Get the picture?

Of course you do, and I'm not here to belabor boring political views or to hammer you with dragging out how Ecclesiastes contrasts the meaninglessness of life with the real meaning of it, namely the love of God. It's worth the exercise, though, because the more things change the more they stay the same. I doubt Solomon could have conceived of an Internet, jet travel, representative democracy, electricity or even indoor plumbing. For an advanced people of their time, by our standards, the ancient kingdom of Israel was still very primitive. It was only a few generations removed from the savage conquest of Canaan, and the slavery of 400 years in Egypt. And despite all that, despite having more wealth and blessing than any man in history (up to that point), Solomon saw the meaninglessness of it all. He saw that, without God, all the wealth, possessions and anything

else was meaningless. What good was it to work all life-long if the only goal in doing so was to get the job done?

That's pointless.

It was pointless then and it's pointless now. If your only goal is to simply work, you're working for the wrong reason. If all you do on the job is thrive because of the job, you seriously need a gut-check. Don't believe me? Adopt that as your goal. I guarantee you'll be unhappy on the job before the end of the pay period. That's a good way to learn to hate your job. Personally, I don't have time for that.

Instead, since we were made for work, perhaps the better way is to remember just that. Our vocation and the talents each of us has in that vocation are gifts from God. I don't want to be a healthcare consultant forever, but I'm thankful to have the position I have and thankful to be where I am at the moment. Like all things here, it won't last. You may not like working in retail, or staying at home, or teaching the kids, sitting in a missile silo, hoeing a row, supervising a deli, driving a truck or whatever it is you do. But if you're using your God-given talents in what you do and you're serving your fellow man in doing it, then praise God for you and your job. Find your meaning in life in the Man who gives both life and that meaning, and the work will work itself out. Not only will you find that Monday's are something to survive, but I'm betting you'll find they're a reason to celebrate.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 3 May 2012

Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. Ecclesiastes 1, verses 4-7.

When was the last time you considered the majesty of nature? And do you think nature lasts forever?

This will come as no surprise but I don't believe in the story of evolution. I won't go into all the reasons; let's just leave it at there are too many holes in the idea for me to swallow it whole. I find it difficult to believe that the splendor of nature is billions of years old, that the holistic, interdependent, intricate ecosystems we see today descended from a mass of undefinable primordial goo. I don't see how you can cherry-pick bits and pieces out of Scripture, believing some things and discarding others. In my view, you either accept it or you don't. Thus, I reject the idea of seven days equaling seven long periods of time or seven eons. They were either seven days or they weren't. Either things were created as it says or they weren't.

And yet...and yet King Solomon said that 'the earth remains forever.' On the surface, that would seem to be an endorsement of an eons-old nature. Um, not quite. Do we need to say neither Solomon nor the people of his time had ever heard of Charles Darwin (because he was thankfully centuries away from being born), that they simply accepted that everything they knew had been created at some point in time? So why did Solomon say the earth remains forever? My uneducated read of the verse is that it is poetic, a rhetorical device, perhaps a metaphor. I think it's common, even today. How many times have you heard someone say "this is taking forever" or "I haven't seen you in forever?" I think 'forever' in this verse means "a very long time." As far as a post-Bronze Age king would have understood (even the wisest one ever), forever would be an extremely long, unknowable time.

When someone of Solomon's day would consider nature, I believe they would have accepted that it simply was, that it was God-given, not the end product of a billions-year-old process of random chance. And I think, in that simplistic view of the world, there was (and is) a marvelous acceptance of a marvelous miracle. The verses see nature as a magnificent amalgamation of interrelated things. The sun rises and the sun sets. The concept of orbital revolution wasn't discerned for several thousand years more, but that didn't stop Solomon from seeing the rising and setting sun for the miracle that it was. It could mark time, illuminate the world in a predictable manner, and return light and life to darkness. The winds would come and the winds would go, and the people of ancient Israel wouldn't have known how sunshine created and affected them. They would have, however, understood the cyclical nature of winds from the west and the difference between them when they blew from the south versus the north.

And then there's the sea. I don't know much about it, but I'm thinking that the Israel of 3000 years ago wasn't as fertile as the Israel of today. Modern farming and extensive irrigation have brought life to desert and made 2012 Israel practically self-sufficient in its food supply. That wouldn't have been the case in Solomon's time, where farming would have been on a smaller scale and there simply wouldn't have been the ability to mass irrigate in the ways that can be done today. Israel was defined, then, by the seas, by the Sea of Galilee on the north, the Dead Sea to the east, and the vast Mediterranean to the west. To someone who didn't know that there were seven continents on the planet – all of them surrounded by much larger oceans – the seas would have seemed endless, timeless and limitless. Because his nation could only farm and raise food on a comparatively small scale, that vast sea would also have been a ready source of food and life. Even today, the nations (like Israel) around the Mediterranean are sea-focused. They still derive their culture, much of their food and economy, and much of their national definition from the body of water at their border. So it is now, so it would have been with Solomon.

So what's the point? In the context of King Solomon expressing the meaninglessness of all things without God, I read that, compared to the wonders of nature, the power of the sun and winds, and the vast expanse of the

seas, man's condition is meager. If, without God, all things are meaningless, then man's condition is especially meaningless. If God can make this powerful natural world that seems unending on its own, then man, who He also made, is powerless and puny. It's almost an expression of logic, wise Solomon contrasting the intimidating power of nature with the insignificant ability of man alone.

And yet it's only a rhetorical vehicle. There are verses up ahead that spell out the second half of the contrast. Like a good attorney, Solomon makes his case based in fact but using emotion. He lays out his proof that our condition without God is hopeless before defining the real hope to be found in his Savior. I like to think, then, of the Hebrew king recording these thoughts, then gazing out over a Judean sunset from the splendor of his palace. He would have felt awe-struck and thankfully humble. All around him were the signs of prosperity, gifts from a God who had blessed him and provided for him without end. I believe King Solomon would have seen the majesty of nature, considered his and his subjects' place in it, and then considered how it is God who brings all things together for His glory and limitless love. That's not some evolving speculation. It's something that is.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 4 May 2012

All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. Ecclesiastes 1, verse 8.

It's never enough. Face it: it's just never enough. No matter what 'it' is, it's never enough. When I see something, I want more. When I want more of something, I think about it all the time. When I think about something all the time, I want to see it. Then when I see it, it's never enough. Vicious cycle really.

And then there's listening. Ever get a song stuck in your head and you just can't get it out? Or maybe you hear a new song on the radio and you REALLY want to find out who recorded it, and you're simply stuck on that song until you do. I'll admit, too, that I'm one of those drivers who usually has the radio on. I will have the windows down and the radio on even louder (because the windows are down and it's noisy). Sometimes I just like to drown out the thoughts in my head or let the sound of music couple with the sound of driving to drive out the important sounds that a better man would hear.

When I am alone in a hotel room, I usually turn on the TV just to have the background noise of someone there. There are some pictures I can look at over and over and seemingly not get enough of being amazed by thing; ones that specifically come to mind are videos of the 2011 earthquake in Japan, or maybe the Titanic deep underwater, or pictures of a newborn baby sleeping. I just can't get enough of looking at those things. And yet, even when I stare for hours, or distract myself seemingly forever, it's never enough.

Got skin? Got sin. Nuff said.

Own up to it but attribute it (in part) to the senses. They're gifts from God that help us make our way in the world.

But they can be traps, too. They can lure us into thinking, contemplating, planning or doing things we might not otherwise have done. What's more, even if we do finally get our fill of looking, hearing, tasting, smelling or touching something, it becomes tedious, wearisome like the verse says. Maybe it's the obsession that took so much to 'get it.' Or maybe it's the realization that, once we've achieved a goal it might not be cracked up to be all we thought it was.

Or maybe it's the realization that, despite all our wanting, needing, obsessing, worrying and scheming/working to get what our senses tell us we want, we aren't God. And because we aren't God, being second best isn't enough.

Yep, vicious cycle.

Surely God who is and has all things knew this when He inspired the thoughts into King Solomon. He knew that the eyes could never behold enough beauty to really satisfy, that the ears could never hear music as sweet as an angel's song, that no smell could be so delectable as an aroma pleasing to the Lord, that no taste could be as satisfying as being fed by Him, and that no touch could electrify us as much as the touch from our someday-glorified bodies. God made our minds to conceive brilliant and truly inspired thoughts, but He understood how those things could obsess us, pushing him to the margins. God knew that everything in the human condition wasn't Him, but that He was over everything in our condition. Perhaps He gave us this verse as a reminder that our senses will only be fulfilled when we use them to behold our Maker.

I've beheld the beauty of Austrian Alpine valleys, of blood-red volcanic sunsets over the North Pacific, of a blanket of stars unshielded by the distraction of coastal lights. My years have allowed me to stare into the beauty of the Grand Canyon and down valleys at Glacier; Texas sunsets, New England sunrises, and any time of the day in far northern Minnesota. Even better, I've been blessed to behold the beauty of my children being born, of telling people I love them before they died, and of feeling real forgiveness for real transgressions. At

the end of all things, aside from that last one, those wonderful experiences are never enough. There is never enough time in the day to fill up my eyes or fill up my heart.

I'm just some average Dave from north Texas; I'm really nobody special, and I'm also really betting that you have stories of how you've beheld beauty on your own. Thanks to King Solomon's words, I hope you can say with me that it's all good but it's almost never enough because of who we are and the condition we're in. This side of heaven, I think that's the best that can be expected.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 7 May 2012.

*What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.
Ecclesiastes 1, verse 9.*

This is one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture. There is nothing new under the sun. It's the verse that gave lie to everything that happened in the 1960s, on Jersey Shore, and in my day to day life. There is nothing new under the sun. Nothing about our lives is truly original and that can be a sobering thought, almost a negative one if you think about it. It's also a hopeful mirror into which we can gaze and know that God has our back at all times.

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again. Explain that to the generation that has iPhone's and iPad's and instant global communication the likes of which have never been seen before. Stop me if I'm wrong, but the people of our day want instant information and seriously believe that things that are happening now have never happened before. This is the fastest time in history when so many of us are interconnected and instantly available. Sounds a lot like Babel (or babble) to me because doesn't every generation's improvements on the previous generation's innovations simply build on what has been done before? I mean, last week there was the news story about the man in Australia who's going to build a replica of the Titanic (and call it, originally, "Titanic II", which is a little like "Bambi II" or "the Kardashian family"). He's going to build a new ship that looks a lot like the one that sank 100 years ago and this time, God-willing, sail it into New York harbor. Will Kate and Leo be aboard? Tune in later. Been there done that; let's hope for a different outcome to the trip.

But the point remains: there's nothing new about the idea. It's a sequel. In fact, most of the world in which we live is a sequel, and (in my opinion) all of American pop culture. If you noodle that thought long enough, it can really get you down. Wrapped up in it is the notion of true hopelessness. Even our most brilliant innovators are really just building on old ideas, re-made concepts, or what has been forgotten long enough to make it seem new. If there's really nothing new to be expected, then what's the use of living? Think that thought on a day when life has you down and I'll guarantee that you won't walk away from the thought with a smile on your face.

And yet...

...And yet if you think about it, there's a degree of comfort in knowing that, now that we're living in the post-modern era, nothing is really new. Even as we invent brand new technologies, those new things are based on old ideas, on things that worked and have been made to work better; nature is improved upon and manipulated to better serve the needs of people. Through it all, people are crazy if they think that God isn't at work. The obvious proof of Him is all around in the nature He created (and maybe in the talent He bestows on people to use nature). If you don't believe that, look at the world outside that regenerates itself every season. Each season does something new that is built-on in the next season. This has been going on for many centuries in the same way as it always has. It's comforting to know that the seasons come and go, and as our world seemingly changes, God simply is.

Besides, just because it isn't really new doesn't mean it isn't new to us. There's so much you and I haven't seen or done yet, and so many possibilities in what we can do through faith. Christ said he makes all things new, and in Him all things are new every day. Every day is a fresh start, an untried moment. Even as the things that happen in our lives can be replays of past actions, how they will mix and mingle in infinite possible ways is the fun part. Infusing them with God's Spirit, the three-in-one presence of Him, bonds meaning and love into all those possibilities. That's not only a comfort: that's a whole new ball game.

I have a box of recipes, documents, and bric a brac that belonged to my great grandmother. I never met her; she died eight years before I was born. Yet in the closet in my office sits a box full of things she compiled during the First World War. There are those recipes, and newspaper clippings, and original Liberty Stamps and other things that have been sitting together for nearly 100 years. It's my intention to make these things into a

book, maybe even a cookbook, and publish it in five years, to coincide with the centenary of the US' entry into that war. In doing so, I'll tacitly acknowledge that this isn't a new idea, that there's really nothing about it that's new under the sun. I'll simply take the good things left to me by someone who never knew me and repackage them into something useful that other good people might just find interesting. It's an example of how what has been will be again, but thank God that He simply is and allows this dynamic to play out in our lives. Thank God He does so and uses that to point out our constant need for Him who was and is and is still to come.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 8 May 2012

Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. Ecclesiastes 1, verse 10.

A few more words about how what is really is nothing new.

I was online, reading the news this morning. When I'm on the road, I get up early to have a long distance devotion with my wife, then I usually check the news of the world. For some reason, this morning I woke up extra early and spent some of my awake time surfing the web. One headline said "Spain to spend billions on bank rescue." Another asked "is Iraq returning to authoritarianism?" There was "Putin returns," and "the rise of nationalism in Europe" and "DOJ fails to nail Wall Street bigs" and there was another that said "Pentagon cuts troops, keeps civilians."

We could go on and on, surfing from news site to news site copying headlines. The more you read them the more the verse from Ecclesiastes (both yesterday's and today's) is proven true. The news of today is fresh today, but it really isn't new. I seriously think that, if you flashed back to headlines from 50 or 100 years ago you would find things remarkably similar. There would be stories about foreign turmoil, about governmental changes and initiatives, human interest items, and the like. To flash back a little sooner, remember one of the phrases from yesterday: there is nothing new under the sun.

The iPod is the new Walkman, which was a new transistor radio. In 1999 I carried a small pager, something smaller than a pack of cigarettes that wasn't much different from the huge brick that I carried in 1991 during the first Gulf War. My current cell phone does more things than the analog thing I used to use in Colorado back in the mid-90s, but its basic purpose is still the same. The 2012 Ford Escape I'm renting in Minnesota this week is really just an upgraded version of a Ford Model T from 1912. I first carried a laptop on company travel in 1997, and in reality it wasn't much different from the one I'm typing on this morning.

I think we could flash back hundreds of years and see similarities between what was and what was before it. I just finished reading a book called "Ameritopia." It was a book about philosophy, specifically as it relates to governmental theory; yes it was sort of dull. What isn't dull about it is learning how the thinking of Montesquieu, John Locke and Adam Smith so greatly affected the political thinking of the American founding fathers (as well as how they mostly rejected the philosophies of Plato, Hobbes, and Thomas More's Utopia). The ideas they encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence weren't new: they were just newly packaged. 236 years later, we're still talking about those ideas, and about what freedom and liberty mean to us today. The ideas are new to some of us, but they aren't really new.

Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. Solomon said that nearly 3000 years ago and isn't it still so very true today? If a man living in a building made of stone and bricks could look out over his vast kingdom and realize that it wasn't too far removed from the land and life that had existed a thousand years before himself, then aren't we arrogant if we think we're any different? Sure, the new gadgets and the fresh ideas and the cool clothes and flashy trends all seem new but they really aren't. Fashion is a good example, namely how cool it is to rehash trends that were fashionable in a previous generation. If something goes out of style, hold onto it for a few years. Chances are it will circle back around at some point. At that time, it'll be retro chic.

And it will seem totally new, completely fresh and trendy to whoever recycles the look at that time. They'll be labeled as avant garde, edgy and a trend-setter. In reality, maybe they're just canny and know a good thing when they see it. What was true for Solomon centuries ago is still true here today.

That includes God. He was then, He is now, and He will be always. God isn't a trend or a style or a fad: He simply is. Just like verse nine, that's the unspoken point of today's verse: no matter that what is new is old and what is old is new again, God is.

The earth seems eternal, but in its present form it isn't. There was a time when it wasn't here, when it was created, and when it was different from what we know today. There will come a time when what we know today will pass away. Until then, all the news that's fit to print (and much that isn't) will still come up whenever I do an online search. It may seem new at the moment, and each day is a fresh start, but as long as there are people there will be old things made new and new things made old...until they're made new once again.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 9 May 2012

There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow. Ecclesiastes 1, verse 11.

Even I will admit, this first chapter of Ecclesiastes could be a real downer if we didn't know that it was written to highlight our need for God's grace and His gift in giving it. That grace-part is coming soon, I promise. For now, in this last verse of the chapter, there's one last hint of negativity to put an icing on the cake. Without God, we are meaningless, hopeless, without purpose. We live and we die and that's as good as it gets. What's more, we won't be remembered.

And isn't that one of the most fundamental yearnings we have: to be remembered? I did some research and found that, as of 2012, it appears that nobody knows how many cemeteries there are in the US. Some estimates say as few as 109,000 while another estimate I found put the number at half a million. Think about it: if each one of those cemeteries was only 10 acres (a small plot for a cemetery), then even using the low estimate, there would be over 1 million acres of just cemetery space in America. If we placed them all side by side that's larger than the state of Rhode Island and it would be full of dead people.

Why cemeteries? Because it's not just there that we bury our dead: it's where we build monuments to remember them. If we decided to bury our dead only in that Rhode Island-sized plot, think of how many millions of stone markers there would be, each one of them being a remembrance of someone we lost. Without those stone markers, it would simply look like vacant land. Before long, you'd have people clamoring to use that land somehow, perhaps to 'drill baby drill' or "Occupy cemetery." It would be as if the dead had never even lived, proving the verse undoubtedly true. Clearly, the monuments would be needed and serve a purpose beyond simply marking a plot.

And yet...

...And yet that is not our way. It's not our way because the verse is sadly true. Of the nearly seven billion people on this planet at this very moment, most will die one day without some kind of monument being erected to them. That's simply a sad truth. What's even harsher to know is that most will die and, within a few years, be forgotten outside a small circle of people; within a hundred years, they will probably be forgotten altogether. It's not that people are malicious, coldly blocking out anything that doesn't focus on themselves. Yes, there are people like that, but I don't believe most of us are. We're simply focused on other things. I think it's simply that it's life and it is what it is.

You know: meaningless.

Face it: what was correct for Solomon 3000 years ago is still correct today. Billions of people have lived since that time, and an exponential majority of them are now unnamed and largely forgotten. Residents of unnamed small villages, tenements in the cities, soldiers in long forgotten armies, long fallen empires: all unnamed faces who are forgotten. My wife and I once went saw the Douaumont Ossuary in France. It holds the bones of over 130,000 unidentified soldiers who died in the battle of Verdun in 1915. Once deadly enemies, their mortal remains now rest permanently intermingled in a cold stone building: unidentified, even though they all died in uniform, as numbered soldiers in the Allied and Triple Alliance armies. Were their remains not assembled as a striking memorial of what human genocide really looks like they would be unremembered bodies lying unmarked in a field, largely forgotten less than 100 years after the struggle that cut short their lives. Even as they are now, the men are unidentified and always will be.

At least to men. To men, they are simply a pile of bones. To God, they were dear children who died horrible deaths. To some men and women, we matter while we are here, and for awhile our presence is missed when we pass away; for some, there's no getting over that. Time doesn't heal all wounds: it erases them. To our loved ones, our friends, and those who knew us, we live and we die and with enough time and without

memorials, we are a vanished memory. The ancient kings of Egypt built ornate tombs for themselves, monuments to their own vanity in the vain hope that they would be remembered and, if it were possible, resurrected to enjoy their wealth again. Now that wealth is largely museum pieces.

Not to God. To God, both the lavish pharaoh and the unknown pauper mattered. To Him, they were personal, they were children, they were real. We may not remember them, but God did and does. He does because He is. To the immense God of all the universe, every one of the billions of us who've ever lived is a real person with real hopes, love, problems, tears and joy. He knew them when we didn't; He knows them now, wherever they are, when we don't.

I like to write these words because they're a way to reach out and help using a talent given to me by God. I like to think they're an inspired view of what I understand when I read bits and pieces of something supernatural left for us from the Divine. If I didn't know Ecclesiastes (and all of Scripture) was Divinely transmuted I would simply think it was a collection of good maxims and I might still comment anyway; after all, I'm no different from anyone else. But I'll admit that I write them for another reason as well. I'd like to leave a monument by which I might be remembered. Without God, these words are a paltry monument; simple ramblings from an even simpler intellect. Perhaps the better way is to realize that the real monument we leave is how we share God, how we share real love with others, especially those closest to us. Books come and go, but that love, well, it lasts forever because He still is. It isn't up to me whether or not I'll be remembered once I'm gone, but it is up to me to live life now to the fullest with God guiding my way. Doing that, then a memorial becomes a moot point.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 10 May 2012

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 1, verses 12 – 14.

Let's start by admitting I was wrong. Verse 11 wasn't the end of the chapter...it was simply an intermission. It's an intermission that I failed to recognize in the online Bible from which I copy these verses now (biblegateway.com, where you can find dozens of different translations). When I was researching yesterday's verse, I looked and mistakenly saw the verse that I thought started chapter 2. My apologies for any confusion I might have caused.

And I was wrong about another thing: we don't just bring on troubles ourselves. Indeed, perhaps God sometimes 'puts' them on us. Isn't that what the verse says? Oh boy, here we go with that thought.

Not long ago I was talking with a woman who said she thought God hated her. She's had up and down troubles and things haven't always been easy. She told me she really thought that God hated her, that He was punishing her for something. The choices of her life hadn't made her happy and things had been going wrong. She felt very depressed. My response was that I didn't believe that was true, that God didn't hate her, that she was being attacked when she was vulnerable.

But does this verse prove me wrong? It says "what a heavy burden God has laid on men." Not my words: they're the author's (presumably King Solomon, though it could have been someone else). Doesn't that imply that God puts our sins on us? When we mess up, God places those sins squarely on our shoulders. If we've done anything that is wrong, doesn't that kind of make it God's fault, at least in part, for letting that happen?

Nope.

It's talking about vanity.

In fact, isn't it just a little vain to imply that God is at fault for our choices? Like it or not, when we transgress, when we sin, when we mess up, when we do wrong, however you want to put it, we make choices. If you tell your kid to not do something and you stand back and they do it, does that put you at fault? If your boss tells you to not do something (or if a regulation says not to) but you do it anyway, is your boss at fault for putting you in the work environment?

Nope again.

Again, the verses are talking about vanity. After considering that the works of man without God are meaningless, Solomon admits that even with all his God-given wisdom, he looked into the doings of men and did some of those things himself. All that wisdom didn't prevent him from knowing he could be in temptation at any moment. All that wisdom didn't stop him from doing wrong when he did (and later in life, Solomon went very wrong, forsaking God and chasing after idols). The more he looked at the human condition, the more he saw that living on our own, just for ourselves, was hopeless, fruitless, purposeless, and a life lived in vain. What's more, the more he looked the more he saw that it was vanity by choice, that is, even a form of idolatry to think that we know better than the God over all things. It is a vain choice, a hopeless one. Pure vanity; pure vain choice.

God doesn't dog-pile our sins onto us. He allows them to enter into our lives because He doesn't want robots who simply do what He says automatically. God is love and He wants that love in our lives. He gives us the choice to love or not, knowing that any deviation from His love isn't love. Sin is anything that separates us, even a little bit, from that love. God doesn't put our sins on our shoulders, but He does allow us to put them there ourselves. He is that parent above, telling us what is right & wrong, then standing out of the way to let us

experience our choices. Good choices usually bring reward; bad choices bring less desirable consequences. Either one is done in love because it takes a truly loving God to even allow us the liberty of free choice. Even when we get down, God doesn't abandon us. Instead, he offers us an alternative. Turn from the meaningless and seek His real meaning. God wants us to love him selflessly, the way He loves us, not to be forcibly compelled to do so.

So even when you're king, you get to see the fruit of your choices and how meaningless things are when you decide that it's all about me.

Which brings me back to my friend. She's a good person, a educated lady and a survivor. She's also a sinner like me and you. I reminded her that she knew her Scripture and that nowhere in Scripture does it say that God hates us or that He does things to get back at us. If He did that, we couldn't live. I identify with her depression; I've been there myself. Nobody wants to say something that can get someone even more down, so I didn't. I simply reminded her that God loves her and through these struggles that love can shine even more. My own experience is that, the more depressed I get over something the more that love seems to be hidden from me. But that's an attack, a consequence of my wrongs. It's the enemy working overtime to hide what God really feels for me from me. In reality, when I do wrong, like Paul says, God's love is all the more amplified. The enemy fights a real spiritual war every minute against us, trying to keep me from seeing that God is always calling me back to His plan of good for my life. So it is with me, so it is with my friend, so it was with Solomon (or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes) and so it is with you.

And that's where I leave it. I'm reminded of The Band, and Levon Helm (who recently died) and their song "The Weight." The song wasn't written about the life of a believer, but it could have been. "Take a load off Annie, take a load for free; take a load off Annie, and you can put the load right on me." That refrain could have been written about you, me and God, who seems to put the weight of our vain sins on us but, in reality, lets us carry it around so we can see how much He really wants to do it for us instead. Lay down whatever burden you have. Lay it down and rest from it for awhile. Be content with the success of the moment, even when that success is simply having air in your lungs and a smile on your face. As long as we're here, we have life and we can choose to keep trying to do better. Troubles come but we can deal with them, we can resist and turn from them when we realize that all things apart from God are meaningless and, like His Son said, apart from Him we can do nothing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 May 2012

What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. Ecclesiastes 1, verse 15.

This is a proverb. I can picture the king who first uttered it, talking, saying all these brilliant things, and then gazing off at nothing in particular, then uttering this. He might have had a distant look in his eye when he did so, perhaps looking lost but really just looking deeper.

It is also a statement that says “there are bigger things than you, Dave.”

My Concordia NIV reference says basically that plus “suck it up.” My colloquialism aside, that interpretation of the proverb says there are bigger things in the world than we know and we should simply accept our lot in life. Granted, the version of that reference was written in the late 1970s by professors and theologians who had been involved in ministry for a very long time. Consequently, their interpretation is very likely based on common theological doctrine from the 1940s and 50s when they first went to seminary.

Um, there’s still nothing new under the sun. Acknowledging that, let me say that I disagree, at least as concerns the NIV interpretation. I accept interpretation number one – “there are bigger things than you, Dave” – but reject colloquial Lutheran doctrine number two – “suck it up.”

You see, I don’t believe God would ever say “suck it up” or “deal with it” or anything to imply that, because this sinful world really sucks since we and our ancestors jacked it all up, we should just accept it and get on with breathing. Such a response, while His prerogative, would be out of His character. Instead, I like to think He would respond with “let me help you with that.”

It’s true that there are bigger things than any of us. One of the best pieces of advice my parents gave me when I entered the Air Force was “don’t fight the system. The system is bigger than you.” It was advice that had been imparted to them by my dad’s commanding officer back in the 1950s. It was good advice then and good advice still, i.e. there’s nothing new under the sun; very Ecclesiastical, you might say. It meant that the system was in place for a reason, that it had been built into what it was over time and through proven trials, and that one person shouldn’t buck the system, especially where military cohesiveness is involved. It’s solid advice that I’ve put to good use in other jobs and other situations.

Yet, if the system is wrong or if the system is set to harm someone or if the system is immoral, I simply don’t accept it and suck it up. For years, I’ve been one of those people who rages against the machine. Ask any of the guys I debate with on Facebook (we have some very spirited political debates) and they’ll talk about how I’m sometimes, well, a pain in the neck. Where something is wrong, I don’t accept it and I don’t give in quickly. At times, I come off as a snarky know it all but I’m willing to fight for a point if that point is in the right. If it’s something that grinds against my principles, I speak up and work against it.

Personally, as long as I take it to God first and let Him guide me, I believe that’s a wholly proper thing to do. That’s not saying that my opinions are God-driven or that the Almighty endorses what I say...I’m not a televangelist. But it is saying that I work and try to put prayer before response and trust that I’ll be led to not say things ungodly.

Ungodly is one thing; bucking the system is another. Nowhere in Scripture (and especially not in this verse) does it say that we will be free from all troubles if only we believe. Indeed, this verse, if taken as a reminder that there are things beyond our control, says that a world of things happening beyond our control does mean that trouble will happen and it will be out of our hands. In this, the Lutherans make a good point. Personally, I would like to see some theological study done to see if the number of prayers said by a person correlates to the number of threats, challenges, troubles, or temptations then put at their door. I’m just a dumb guy from the suburbs but even I can see that, the more you involve God in your life, the more you’re likely to be attacked by the evil one. Some attacks will be bigger than others, and some may cost us dearly. We should accept that

attacks will happen, that there are troubles in our lives. But that doesn't mean we have to put up with them. The better way? Put on the armor of God. Suit up, lace up your boots, and pick up that sword, soldier.

The world may indeed be bigger than us but our God is bigger than the world. He can help us with how we deal with it. That's all there is to it and that's a truth bigger than any petty evil.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 15 May 2012

I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 1, verses 16-17.

Two of my three kids are in school. Oldest Daughter is in college. In fact, she's just completed her third year of it. She's studying to be a teacher and has learned to steadily apply herself. She'll be taking a semester off in preparation for her December wedding, but she says she then plans to go back in January of next year and finish off her bachelors degree. I seriously hope she means it because it would be a waste if she didn't.

Middle child is in-between schools now, having decided to not go to college but still interested in attending a beauty school at some undetermined point in the future. If 'finding yourself' is a particular age, she's been that age for a couple of years now. She's incredibly bright but seems to be drifting, yet she's also acutely aware that she's still in the process of learning.

And Youngest Child, also called "Son Bull," is our last kid living at home and is a sophomore in high school. He's the one who has struggled most with school, being dyslexic and working extra hard every class to overcome instructional design that isn't geared for people with his particular abilities. He works to apply himself and I see a bright future for him in a venue that doesn't involve sitting in front of open books for 8 hours a day. He has never really liked school and that's understandable, but deep inside I suspect he wishes he did.

Their mom and I are both college graduates. We were both down with the regimen of studying (and paying fat checks) to get that parchment paper. For us, it was both personal goal and professional credentialing. In 21st century America, college is simply what you have to do to stack the odds in your favor of positioning yourself for well-paying work. At the time she graduated, my wife went right to business school and then got a degree immediately after. It took me a few years longer to do some growing up and decide I wanted to get a degree as well. When I went for it, I got one degree, then another, and after another short break I got a graduate degree.

And it's worthless.

Yep: worthless. I have three college degrees and they're worthless. My wife was the first person in her entire family to ever earn a college degree and it is worthless. It's a nice goal to achieve and (if I had it framed) looks great in a frame on the wall but it's truly, totally, completely worthless. You can study for years, studying all things worldly and constructive, and that & a quarter still won't get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks. It will be only a piece of paper, and when you're gone it won't matter. People might remember you for getting that degree, but in the long run it won't matter. It's a chasing after the wind, a fruitless and meaningless pursuit. You can study your entire life, get a scrapbook full of learned degrees, and spend all day in the glorious pursuit of academic brilliance yet, when you're done, it won't be worth as much as a good ham sandwich.

There's more. Madness and foolishness are the equal of your knowledge. All that studying and academic achievement is just like the one that flew over the cuckoo's nest. The wisest man in history confirmed it. He was gifted with this divine wisdom and he used all that knowledge to discern that the wisest thoughts in all humanity were no better than madness. He then rationally contemplated every facet of insanity and came to the conclusion that it was the opposite of wisdom yet had this in common: it was meaningless, totally meaningless. The process of analysis, of contemplation, was a waste of time just as much as the subject of the analysis itself.

Maybe I should reconsider getting that doctorate. It's a waste of time...

...but not really.

Not really because we shouldn't forget how the unspoken corollary to the entire book is that, without God, all things are meaningless. Verses sixteen and seventeen are merely the latest exposition of that fact. Where other verses have talked about things we do, things around us, these verses talk about what we know, something inside of us. Without God, even the thoughts, memories and dreams we hold dearest are worthless just like that college degree. It doesn't have to be that way, and changing it starts with Him. If I put my talents at the feet of Him who entrusted them to me, then there's an opportunity to use a talent in service to others, for its intended purpose. Without God it's worthless paper; with Him it's unstoppable ability.

But what about ministers? I mean they're learned in God's word. They spend years obtaining higher education to knowledgeably teach the simplest concepts of life and death. Does this mean that the only people who really are learned are pastors and people who have studied God's word? No, not necessarily. In fact, I've known quite a few of them who are fruitless and meaningless and that's just talking from the pulpit. There isn't a separate line in heaven for people with education any more than there is a separate line for those in the ministry. If there is, is it too bold to say that I expect to be standing ahead of a few folks who I once stood in before in a pew? All I will really say is "thank God for their gifts too."

I have to admit I feel a little envy for my kids going to school. Visiting new places, learning new things about them is something I value, and God gave us intellect to improve, sharpen, and use in His world. There's nothing wrong with valuing education so long as it doesn't take the place of the source of real knowledge. When that happens, all the wisdom in the world is no better than madness and all madness is meaningless. We were meant for better. While they're still in school and at the time when it's easiest for them to learn, I'll work hard to keep teaching that to my kids.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 16 May 2012

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief. Ecclesiastes 1, verse 18.

This is the last verse of the chapter. If you think back, Ecclesiastes chapter one is a pretty bleak picture. Everything you think, know, do, want, or conceive is meaningless. Humanism is a dead end; secularism is pointless. Even living just for the sake of living is pretty much a waste of time.

Without God, that is.

The capstone on it comes with this verse. All you could ever learn will only bring you sorrow. The more you learn, the worse off you will be.

And this from the most knowledgeable man who ever lived. Think your best college professor or best teacher on academic steroids, steeped in common sense and real wisdom the likes of which you or I can't even touch. After all he had learned, after recognizing all the knowledge in the world and applying true wisdom to it, the Teacher (presumably King Solomon) found that it wasn't worth crap. The more he looked into things, the more distraught he knew he would become. The more he tried to delve into the way of things the more hopeless he felt.

Without God, that is.

If you've ever felt the itch to want to know more, this has to be a downer for you. I mean, isn't that one of man's deepest yearnings, to know more? It's very Star Trek: to boldly go where no man has gone before. That yearning goes way, way back in time. It was the basest of yearnings to which Satan appealed in the Garden. "Don't you want to be like God?"

Isn't that what such knowledge craving really boils down to? Simple idolatry? So would it be any wonder that the wisest man in history would contemplate being a man who knew all things and, knowing them, finding out that it wasn't enough? What is there beyond knowing all things?

Being God, of course. Even a simpleton like me knows that.

Centuries later, what's changed? A massive percentage of the US economy is tied to funding college education. I read a blog post this morning where the blogger played Paul Revere, warning of an impending financial collapse of the ponzi scheme that is the financing of higher education. If you spend too long in the ivy halls of academia, whether it's in a secular university or even in the hallowed halls of theological seminary, you find that the quest for knowledge can be neverending. You can learn one thing and then another and another. It's like looking forward through one of those pictures where the person in the picture is holding a picture of themselves holding a picture of themselves. Dig as deep as you want and every answer will pose another question.

Without God, that is. I bet you get the picture.

Granted (and we talked about this the other day) there's nothing wrong with learning, or pursuing a degree, or getting multiple degrees. Learning is admirable and encouraged and even Godly. Check out Job 22, Psalm 107, Jeremiah 9, Luke 10, John 17, Colossians 1 and 2nd Peter 1. Learning is how we acquire knowledge of God through His creation of which we're all a part. It's when that learning takes the place of whom we're learning about that trouble comes into play. "Apart from me you can do nothing," said Christ and that's one of the things He meant. God is the foundation of all knowledge. Learning apart from God results in nothing and nothingness. Or, as Solomon said, "for with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

I think we've heard that before. And since that's the case, then this is a good place to end. Next stop: let's talk about the 'good stuff' in life.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 17 May 2012

I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly —my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 1 – 3.

A small list of things I like in this life: medium rare steak, good scotch (and bourbon), Super Bowl Sunday, an evening playing Pit with my family, the feel of a fan blowing cool air on my skin, a good run in the early morning, fart jokes with uptight people, deviled eggs (see previous), 'light bulb' moments of revelation, puppies, hot coffee, the color green, new car smell, John Wayne movies, afternoon naps, afternoon sex, a job well done, talking with good friends, first class airline seats, red wine, the city of Minneapolis, the beach, most anything by Rachmaninoff, walleye fishing, helping somebody in need, and finding good deals at the mall.

Notice anything missing? That's on purpose. I left it (or Him) out in the spirit of the verses. The first part of this book talked about how things without God are meaningless; duh. But the things that it mentioned – work, nature, senses, thoughts, learning – were more ethereal and not sensual. You can enjoy work, nature, thinking and learning, and you can use your senses, but they aren't designed for pleasure. If meaning isn't to be found in those things, then perhaps it could be found in pleasure.

This was perhaps when Solomon, the Teacher, turned to things designed to make one happy by experiencing them. Our party culture seems to endorse that. Thomas Jefferson would have liked it. We think of Jefferson as one of the wisest of America's founding fathers, and he enjoyed his pleasures. He was refined, tasteful and epicurean. While Jefferson lived, he lived well, even extravagantly. When he died, he left behind so many debts that his estate was sold off to only partially pay them. This is the same man who edited out parts of the Bible that centered on Christ's divinity. I wonder what he did with Ecclesiastes.

Jefferson liked his wine, his luxuries, his philosophy and his wealthy lifestyle. And he squandered all of them. If only he'd paid attention to Solomon's words about how even those pleasures were a waste of time. The warning of that is, after all, contained in these three verses. When the writer of them discovered that the knowledge of the world was empty without God, he turned to contemplate and to experience the pleasures of the world to see if they could replace his longing for real meaning. Laughter, wine, women, food: he tried them all and to excess like the rest of the epicureans would. He lived better than Jefferson ever did and, if those things could make someone happy, you'd think they would have done so for Solomon.

Instead, he still felt empty. Why is that? You know the reason.

I'll say this for Solomon: he has more self-control than I would have. You read it up above: I like wine, and laughter, and frivolity. I like those largely shallow things because they're fun. Life should be fun. Faith should be fun. When I was a teen, our minister always ended his sermons with a benediction that said "may your week ahead be full of joy, peace, laughter, love and fun in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Amen, Guy Newland; well said. Life should be fun. Every day we should strive to have fun, to enjoy ourselves and make the most of it because we aren't guaranteed tomorrow.

But without God even a guarantee would be meaningless. It would be just as meaningless as those thoughts, that academic learning, or the best wine, the prettiest lady and the best meal you could imagine. Even Solomon in all his splendor found that out.

I'm sending out this proverbial early on a North Texas morning after we were up very late at my house. One of my kids snuck out for a little sensual pleasure last night, and called me when they got in a bind. They thought they could sneak out, have some fun, and sneak back home before anyone knew. But when they were done their car wouldn't start. Thank God they called when that happened because they could have gotten hurt, arrested, or worse. Today, the punishment for their particular infraction is swift, appropriate, and non-

negotiable: just like it would be had they been confronted by the local police. Society has become lax in how it treats this particular pleasure and that's both tragic and dangerous given that it's a gateway to deeper and more severe problems. Said kid doesn't like that punishment, but my wife and I are parents and it's our God-given pleasure and duty to enforce a standard whether the punished likes it or not. What they did was without God – and without brainpower, apparently – and it's critical that they understand this. If society won't frown on this behavior for the person's own good, we intend to because we love them and want to see this behavior turned so that it doesn't hurt them in the future. If we didn't do this, then their behavior would likely spiral. While there's time, I prefer to highlight how bad behavior, even when it's fun, is without God and can't be tolerated.

Yes, we like many things in life, and given the right context for them, that in itself isn't bad. My mom tells me that she always saw her own grandmother frown and smirk whenever children were having fun. Apparently my great-grandmother was so pious that she thought when anyone was laughing they were knee-deep in some kind of sin. To paraphrase Don McLean, I can imagine seeing Satan laughing with delight when people like you, me, my kid, Thomas Jefferson, and even King Solomon pursue our pleasures while ignoring the Lord who gave them to us. That doesn't have to be the case because there is a better, more natural way. We can enjoy those things we like but being thankful and moderate in how we do so. We can have a lot of fun while still doing the right and honorable thing. Rather than sneaking around to avoid doing so, maybe it's time we invite the Lord in to join the party in a way that enjoys and celebrates without compromising Him or ourselves.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 May 2012

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 4-10.

I put up a new fence this week. Ok, I didn't actually do this, but I paid to have it done on our property, so you could say I built a new fence. 10 years ago, I built a new house, but same deal: I paid to have it built. I didn't actually build it myself. Ditto for the car I drive, the worn and well-used furniture in my family room, the clothes I wear, and how I've built a small nest egg (a very small one).

Believe it or not, I am a lot like Solomon. So are you. Not the incredibly wealthy part, you know. It's more the 'taking credit for things I oversaw part.' I'm over them; I'm responsible for them; they're under my control. The person paying for them is me; as regards the fence, the person who ordered the build, wood, stain, design and installation is me. This may be a human tendency: to take credit for things we are part of (maybe even in charge of) but that we didn't actually do. It's sort of like ordering a military action and taking credit for it even though you didn't actually do anything except make a decision (though that's important to, just in a different way). As a head of state, that's something with which Solomon might be more familiar than my simple fence installation.

No, you aren't a king anymore than I am. Unless you have bundles of money to quickly invest in Facebook, you probably aren't going to be filthy rich any time soon. Maybe you won't build fantastic palaces, or amazing gardens, or astounding architectural wonders. None of that matters. You have it in you to do those things in your own way in your own life. What's more, you have it in you to do even better things than them. Whether they're big, small, insignificant or internationally famous, you have it in you to do amazing things. You have it in you because God put it in you. What's the catch? How do you tap into that extraordinary talent?

You know the answer.

Where the previous verses talked about things sensual, these (obviously) talk about things achievable. YOU can undertake a great project, build a house, make a garden. YOU can amass wealth and treasure, employees and servants. YOU can become greater than others who came before you. And you can do it without compromising your faith. Don't believe me? Read the verses again. Read them and then remember "it's not about me." That's crucial.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That's Philippians 4:13. And it's how Solomon was able to achieve such extraordinary things. It's the point of the verses. All amazing things that we can do and should do are doable through God. Apart from Him, we can do nothing; that's taken from John 15:5.

Life is an amazing gift and we can do truly amazing things with it when we realize that all our talent, wealth, ability, and future is from God. When we forget that we get into trouble. Solomon did. Much later, years after he wrote this book, he fell away from his once-solid faith. He worshipped idol gods and turned from the true faith. Once that happened, his wisdom turned to foolishness. If only he had remembered the words of his youth. If only he had remembered just why he had been able to build an extraordinary kingdom, who was really responsible for all of it.

This morning, my new fence is wonderful. It cost quite a lot of money and I expect that it will be standing pretty in my backyard for many years to come. It's predecessor lasted 14 years and wasn't built nearly as well. I built the fence but in reality I did exactly nothing to construct it. Before the workers arrived, I scooped dog poop off the patio, moved some lawn furniture, cleaned out some weeds and rocks, and generally prepped the area for

the workers. Those aren't unimportant chores; they needed to be done. But I really did nothing in particular to get the new fence built other than choose it, pay for it, and give that all important 'go' order to the foreman. And yet, today, there's something great standing in my backyard, ready to serve for many years to come. It's a blessing resulting from many other blessings, some of which I earned through my work, most of which I didn't even deserve. Other more skilled craftsmen used their work-days to build the fence but I'm the one responsible for making sure it was done the way I want. After all, I'm the customer. May today be filled with thanks for being the customer in some ways and the worker in others, the one responsible and the one to be responsible for. Both are gifts from God who gives us His love and His talents on loan so that we might prosper, share His love, and live out our lives as daily worship in His grace no matter what we do.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 22 May 2012

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet 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.
Ecclesiastes 2, verses 10-11.

Wouldn't it be nice to be a celebrity? No, this isn't going to be another one of those guilt-riding tomes where I posit how great celebrities have it but how vacant their lives are. Though these verses speak directly to that condition, that isn't where I'm going today. Instead, I'm asking the question: wouldn't it be nice to be a celebrity? I'm writing this from a nice hotel in Edina, Minnesota. It's not the fanciest hotel I've ever stayed in, but it beats most other places as well. This week, I'm driving a rental car that has less than 1000 miles on it and it still even has the new car smell, even if it is a Chevrolet. My job site is at a health plan in north Minneapolis, and to get to it I get to fly every other week on somebody else's dime. In my wallet there's a corporate credit card with no limit and I can pretty much eat wherever I choose with no questions asked.

Wouldn't it be nice to be a celebrity? Are you kidding me? Compared to how most people live, I am a celebrity. This isn't the life I imagined when I was 18 or even when I was 30: it's much better. Many of the things I take for granted are luxuries that others dream about having. Without getting the big head, I'll say I'm very thankful for it...

...mainly because it's meaningless if the only thing I'm in it for is to glorify myself and congratulate myself on my good choices and posh circumstances. Roll out the red carpet and line up the paparazzi because I'm headed down the catwalk. And that's as good as it gets. It doesn't get any better than that, and if you think about that statement, maybe it's because it can't get worse.

Shame, don't you think? That's a real crying shame. I mean, to have that many blessings and not see that, without the proper mode of spirit, they're just window dressing for what's real in life. And what's real in life is God. Fancy yourself a free-thinker all you want: when your thoughts freely think back to the times you've been happiest I'm betting they're the times you've been at peace. Do you honestly think that peace just happens? Do you honestly think that love just happens? Do you honestly think that mercy just happens?

Here's the shocker: yes, they just do, when your heart belongs to the Almighty, that is. He just is those things: peace, love, mercy, and also patience, understanding, wisdom, and strength.

And without that, all the strolling down that catwalk is simply marking time.

Know something else? The times in my life when I haven't denied my heart any pleasure? They were the times I felt worst. During the times when I thought it was all about me, that I deserved A, B or C, or that I simply gave up on what I knew best and indulged in whatever I wanted, well, those were the times when I felt dirtier than a dirt sandwich.

So I sit here in my semi-luxurious room and think back to some of the fleabag hotels I stayed in while I was TDY to Korea; real rat traps. Or the hotel in southern China: a bug-infested hovel (think about that) with no indoor plumbing. And there was the hotel in Jinja, where the bugs were as big as birds and it never really got below 85 and steamy; after all, it was near the Equator. All of those exotic places weren't as nice as this one and this one is in a common, ordinary American city (that just happens to be a stone's throw from where I lived when I was a kid). Yet this and those places alike are meaningless.

I've lived an extraordinary life so far. I've done a year at sea, watched nuclear missiles fly (as well as space-bound rockets), fathered three great children, traveled around the world, been married up and down to an uncommonly patient and extraordinary lady, eaten at some of the finest steakhouses in the world, been to 49

of 50 states, worked with (literally) thousands of different people and known many, many more, I have laughed and loved and worshipped and lost and found again.

And none of it, not a single minute of it, is worth anything unless I first realize that not a single minute of it is about me. It's Him; it's all Him. Without that realization and that saving knowledge, I'm as hopeless as Solomon, who had so much more than I do. I'd be as hopeless as a man facing down Satan, knowing he's already given up.

I'd be like a celebrity, riding from club to club in my stretch limo, primping in the mirror, smiling for the camera, and trying to hide the tears.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 23 May 2012

Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? Ecclesiastes 2, verse 12.

There are different ways you could interpret this verse. For interpretation number one, you could say that it's literal, that in considering wisdom, madness and folly, King Solomon landed on the fact that his predecessor had been a man after God's own heart and that this was as high an aspiration as someone could get. Maybe he realized that God is as good as it gets?

You might also say that it was a bit self-pitying, that Solomon looked over all the splendor of his kingdom and realized that he had only built on something that had been founded by someone else, namely his father. It was his father who had fought all the various wars to unite Israel and drive out foreign threats. It was David who had founded trade routes and merchant ties. It was King David who had been particularly blessed and particularly intimate with God. Solomon was merely the successor.

Flip that last paragraph around and maybe the verse is actually about Solomon's successor, how Solomon knew he had been gifted with something unique and that his sons after him would not have that special blessing. God had given Solomon that terrific gift of wisdom and the men who came after him probably wouldn't have that same gift. It had served him well, but he was unique.

Then there is the idea that the verse is about contrasts. I mean, these are quite different thoughts. One talks about contemplating conditions of the mind, while the second talks about things somebody has physically done (maybe). Metaphysical versus the physical.

Or perhaps it is about the lead-up to the question: when considering all that his father had done before him, Solomon considered it wisdom, madness and folly. After all, King David's reign was peppered with all those. Anything after that would be merely a coda, an addition.

You could also interpret it in a way that I didn't list, and I'm sure there are many. Yours truly is not the sharpest tool in the shed.

However you do, this verse falls in the chapter where Solomon is questioning the meaning of things with which he's familiar. He has already discounted pleasure as being meaningless if it's without God. Here he questions the one thing that sets him apart from everyone else: that divine gift of wisdom. If you read the verses around this one (next one coming soon) you see that he's considering that wisdom is pretty much a worthless thing if it isn't viewed through the prism of his faith. God had granted him to request anything and Solomon requested wisdom. So God poured out that wisdom in abundance, more than on any sole human before or since. And when Solomon considered worldly wisdom, he found it to be not only lacking but worthless.

In 3000 years, what's changed? None of our leaders are wise while quite a few seem to be full of either madness or folly. Indeed, take it a step further. Are you or I any different? Is our wisdom foolishness and our foolishness worthless? Dancing With the Stars has a new champion; Mitt Romney won another primary against opponents who have already dropped out while his opponent scratches by in one state against a convict; what's hot on Youtube changes every five minutes; road rage and Wal Mart people. Trivialities take front and center in our lives yet we're obsessed with them. Is our 'wisdom' foolishness and our foolishness worthless? Consider that for awhile.

Perhaps, though, the best way to interpret it is to do so yourself. Read the verse, maybe read up some more on it with the verses around, or using a concordance to research related ones, and then ask God to open your intellect. Let Him tell you what it means. I'm happy to do some translating, but in reality the real translation that matters is the one you hear from God, not me.

Here's where I finish this one with a challenge: ask yourself the same question Solomon asked. Have you done more than your predecessor, or can your successor do more than you? More than this, what is God trying to tell you? If you live outside faith, I know the answer. Noodle that thought and we'll talk again tomorrow.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 24 May 2012

I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 13 and 14.

John D. Rockefeller and John Smith. The last Ottoman Sultan and the last Ottoman grandmother. Theodore Seuss and Theodore Bundy (yes, I know that's a macabre comparison). William McKinley and his opponent William Jennings Bryan.

What's the connection? They're all dead. Rich and poor alike, the same fate overtook them all.

I get into some pretty heated discussions with friends online about all things political. This too is meaningless...but that isn't the point. With one particular friend, we're constantly discussing rich versus poor. My friend, who has worked very hard all his life to live a hard life and earn all he owns is constantly spouting envy of the rich. He believes that the power of one side is only on the side of the rich while the other side is clearly on the side of the poor. I disagree, usually contending that I don't really much care whether the rich get richer or not so long as government doesn't get in my or his way of attaining what 'happiness' we can.

This too is meaningless because rich and poor will succumb to the same fate. Neither riches nor poverty are virtue, and even if they were, death would await either one.

In a way, these verses are a realization of the hopeless nature of sinful man. Whether we are Einstein the physicist or Einstein the bagel guy, life is a one-way death trip. Our inheritance from our great-whatever grandfather, Adam, is death. That's obviously what the verse is saying: death awaits us all.

So why not just live it up? I mean, smoke a little weed or do a little blow? Sow a few wild oats!

You know the reason.

Would you really want to stand in front of your maker and tell him that was the best you could do with your gifts? Party hard and sleep it off every day? Is that all there is, and are you the wise man or the fool for living so? You do know that the same fate awaits the partier as the pope, and the guy who spends all day working in front of a computer will meet his maker the same as the guy who spends all his days on the beach.

What's more, have you considered the outcome of taking these humanist thoughts to their logical conclusion? If human wisdom and folly are no better than each other, what's the point? Sure, using Pascal's Gambit we can reason that an existence without belief in God is meaningless but I'm talking about a meaning beyond logic. Logic is a construct to understand what we don't understand. I'm talking about the soul, the existential stuff of being alive, of being human. Even an atheist or humanist FEELS beyond just what their physical senses relay. That's the soul in motion. Have you considered the outcome to the soul from relying only on humanist thinking? Every tyrant in history has.

Yesterday, I heard an interview with Penn Jillette. You know: Penn & Teller. He's an atheist and a libertarian, and he's been in the news this week for a commentary (a rant, actually) he recently made. In the interview, he wasn't shrill or screaming or unreasonable in any way. In fact, his thinking and his reasons made perfect sense. They were very tempting. As regards his 'faith' they were also completely vacant, devoid of hope. Penn Jillette is headed for the same human destiny as Billy Graham.

And that's the same fate that awaits the Rockefellers and the Smiths, those Theodores, McKinley and Bryan and the others. They met theirs already; they already transitioned through death. It's the same fate that awaits Barry Manilow and Barry Obama, as well as you and me. We're all human and we're all due a death for the

wrongs we've done. With God living in your heart, thankfully that's merely the gateway to something really meaningful.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 25 May 2012

Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! Ecclesiastes 2, verses 15 and 16.

Here in Minnesota there are cemeteries everywhere. Every town has at least one, and they seem to be in the middle of town. That's actually a sign of progress, if you think about it. It's a sign of growth because cemeteries are usually located on the outskirts of town; health and emotional reasons, I suspect. When the town grows, it grows past the cemetery fence so that it seems they're in the middle of the city when, in fact, the city has simply expanded.

On my way into work I drove by a few. One was a Jewish cemetery, several were Lutheran and I couldn't tell with others. They're full of markers and monuments, some plain and some tall. You've seen them. Some are ostentatious, showy; some are nothing more than a plaque in the ground. Over at Fort Snelling there is a national cemetery with row on row of those simple white markers. The dead are organized and lined up as they served in real life: in dignified military formation.

I didn't realize it until I started writing but these verses really do segue well for the Friday before Memorial Day.

Will your holiday be the start of summer, a weekend of relaxation? Will it be an extra day off, a chance to do some home improvement? Will it be a barbecue and the Indy 500; a family fight or a movie with the wife and kids? Maybe a day at the pool or a chance to sleep in and catch up on some well-earned rest?

You and I are food for the grave. One day we will end up in the ground, perhaps with some stone marker to show where we are buried. Perhaps for a few years, maybe a generation or two, our family will come to visit us, remember us, maybe tend to our plot. Time will change that, though. In time, our wisdom and our foolishness along with the ties that bind us to immediate family will be forgotten when those who remember us join us in the grave. In time, our markers will be just like the rest of them in those cemeteries I drove by this week: just another in the group. They'll be curious mementos left to mark our existence containing faceless names to signify a lifetime of memories and things that nobody else will likely recall.

Like I said, there seem to be cemeteries everywhere. That isn't the case where I live in North Texas. There, it seems you need to look for them because the places where we bury our dead there are remote, away from the population. The dead are where they belong, and that isn't in the place of the living.

What will your monument be? Will you have that simple marble marker in line with all the others, so that people can plant a flag on national holidays to memorialize you? Will your marker be that ostentatious obelisk that stands taller than the other granite around it, or will it be a simple stone with your name? Will your marker be a ground-level plaque or a headstone to mark your family plot?

Or maybe...

...Maybe your monument will be something better, a monument for the living. Maybe your monument will be alive in the love of your family and the security, the home in the heart, the liberty you provide for them. Perhaps your monument will be the memories and the lessons and the good times as well as the bad. Your monument will be in flesh, blood and spirit, and in the words imprinted on their hearts. More than any of this, perhaps your monument will be the faith you infused into their lives as you lived out your own, blessed by God and using the talents He gives you to make a life that can be remembered by more than just stone.

That's what Solomon was referring to. He has been gone for nearly 3000 years. Tradition tells us a few things, but in reality we don't really even know where he is buried. We don't need to. His inspired words live on. His faith and his wisdom are recorded for the ages as part of God's holy Scripture. His monument is one we can

contemplate, admire and use today as we journey through the land of the living. We do not need to dwell long in the plot of the dead.

This weekend is indeed Memorial Day weekend. I would be remiss without recalling that the purpose of this holiday is to remember our war dead, to remember how good men and women died in America's wars to preserve our liberties. They didn't do so at the time thinking it was a noble calling or a higher ideal. I'm betting they didn't even want to die; who does? Yet they gave their all and you and I are here to remember that, to contemplate those reminders they left behind. We have those stone monuments, you know, reminders of the fool and wise men who gave of themselves so that others would not have to. Here in Minnesota, there seem to be cemeteries everywhere. They're the last resting place for all of us, the only real estate in which we spend considerable time. Chances are there is one near where you are today. This weekend, take a few minutes out of your well-deserved break and go place a flag on the grave of a veteran, and say a prayer of thanks that their real monument isn't marble, granite or brass. Their real monument, their real remembrance from God, is the life you live today.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 28 May 2012

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 2, verse 17.

Some of the most unhappy people I know are humanists. They seek their fulfillment from work, from relationships, from life, from knowledge, from anything. They put their faith in mankind and the revelry of being human, of experience. If that's your only hope in life, to get those things, then congratulations! You'll likely get them. They won't make you happy, but you'll get them. Most likely, that is.

See, those are some low expectations. They really are! They aren't necessarily bad ones, but they're very short sighted, very small. The bar has been set pretty low. You can throw yourself into your work very easily, and sometimes that is even good therapy. It's necessary because let's face it: we need to earn a living. But if work is all you live for, is that enough to keep you from hating life?

When you look to relationships to make you happy, is THAT enough to keep you from hating life? I know people who are validated by their relationships; I'm sure you do too. They're people who go from friendship to friendship, relationship to relationship, even bed to bed looking for fulfillment, someone to care. How do you think they feel inside when they admit to themselves that this latest relationship was no better than the previous? Major life-hating usually ensues.

Experiences: what about them? I used to resent it when I was the new younger guy in a group. Whether it was school, work, military service, or anything, I used to resent it when people with longer tenure made me feel small. I allowed them to do it by accepting their premise that they had already 'been there, done that' much better than I, the newbie, ever would or could. It made me feel tiny, unworthy. And it drove me as well: drove me to DO things, to experience them.

Experiencing new things in life can be a wonderful blessing, but not when you're simply in it to check things off some list to satisfy other people who really didn't care much to begin with.

Knowledge. There is so much to know in this life and we are always learning because there's always something new to learn, some new angle from which to view life. What good is it without belief in He who is the foundation of all understanding?

Hatred of life is the end game when the things in life are all you base yours on. If we work so hard looking for things to make us happy, is it any surprise when they grieve us instead? Maybe the problem isn't so much the 'thing' we're striving for. Maybe it's that we're striving for it in the wrong way?

Mind you, work, relationships, life, knowledge, and experience: they're good. By and of themselves, they can be very good things. But without understanding that the clay is simply wet dirt without the potter, then all the 'things' in life are meaningless, a chasing after what's already blown away.

Today is Memorial Day in America. It's the day set aside to honor war dead, remembering how they died and why. Did they hate life when they left it? Were things going along well until the war? Did they realize that everything in life, even a heroic death, is meaningless on its own? In the end, none of these questions or answers matters. What matters is remembering how they lived, why they died, and the words from John 15 that 'greater love has no man than that he would lay down his life for his friends.' That is anything but meaningless.

And that is the missing piece to the verse, to all the book in fact. You know it, but it bears repeating again because we spend so much of life chasing after the wind. We each, even the most devout and faithful of us, spend our lives chasing after things that we think will make us happy when it is the truth of God that we believe with our hearts that holds the key to happiness. It's the easiest thing in the world to get distracted and forget that simple truth; it's as old as Genesis.

Some of the most unhappy people I know are humanists, taking their pleasure in life from the things of life itself. In my experience, most of them end up seeing this as a waste of time. Some of the most selfless people in history are buried in long rows of stone markers; our national cemeteries are full of them. Today is Memorial Day. Let's honor our freedom to contemplate these things by thanking God for them, for the sacrifices of those who gave up living for us, and for the chance to bury our unhappiness with the past. From now on, let's live.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 29 May 2012

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 18 and 19.

Do you ever spend much time wondering who will get your stuff when you die? My wife and I have dreams of owning a house by a lake. We have this shared dream of owning a cabin by a lake where we would put in a dock, a gazebo, and quite a few amenities that would make our golden years seem a bit more golden. Most of my life I've lived in the suburbs but for all of my life I've wanted to live by the water. Now that's becoming more of a possibility and I find myself daydreaming about it from time to time.

What would become of it when we're gone? I suppose our kids would get the property, but who knows what they would do with it? By that time, we'll be in heaven and it really won't matter. And when they're gone it would pass again to someone else. It does make one wonder.

I own a few other prized family possessions. There is a gold watch bequeathed to me by my grandfather, and a Civil War rifle from the other grandfather. I have stamp albums, an old Cadillac, coin collections, the flag that my dad received when he retired from the civil service, a thousand books, the journals I've written for our kids, and plaques given to me as recognition for jobs well done. If all these things burned up in a fire, I would be sad, maybe even devastated for awhile, but I would go on because it's still just stuff. I'd be floored if my house burned down; who wouldn't be? But in reality it's still nothing more than sticks and bricks.

King Solomon supposedly wrote the book of Ecclesiastes and the only property that we have of his is a piece of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The "Wailing Wall" there is sacred to Jews as it is the last remnant we have of the Jewish Temple where God's presence was on earth. We don't have any of Solomon's possessions, his belongings, his grand palace, or anything else that was his. When he died, it was distributed to others who, over time, dispersed it to history. Wars overrun, families bequeath, lines die out. The things that we have are only temporarily ours. When we pass away, they pass to others.

As long as there has been death this has been the case. It's one of the commonalities of all mankind. The shepherd in Tajikistan, the head of the IMF, the Alberta rancher, the pygmy in an Amazon jungle, you and me will all die and whatever we have owned in this life will pass to another. We spend so much of life acquiring property (and debts, which can also pass to others) and it's a prudent, wise thing to be good stewards of those things. It's responsible and even Godly to take good care of the things that come our way, the stuff we acquire. What isn't Godly or responsible is making that the focus of our life.

Making the getting, keeping, and using of things into our primary focus is sin. Pure & simple: it's sin. It's putting something else in front of how we treat and revere He who provided us with that something else. Any time we do this, we're guilty of idolatry. We become guilty of worshipping something graven, something lifeless, something largely unimportant; something ungodly. God didn't make things to be that way, but our actions do. God made all things to bring glory to Himself by demonstrating & sharing His wonderful love in the world. When we put things in front of that, we're guilty.

Not only that, but in addition to being sinful & wrong, it's a stupid waste of time. Actually, I prefer Solomon's poetic description of it as "a chasing after the wind." We should make the most of our talents and experience, and that includes the acquisition of things. But we should never do so to the detriment of others, or in ways that denigrate or degrade God. When we do this, we're guilty of foolishly chasing after the wind because once the winds of time blow away our lives, others are left with all we strove to acquire.

Look high and low in scripture and you won't find the phrase "the one with the most toys wins."

A few minutes ago, I was sitting on our front patio, enjoying a cup of coffee on a pleasant spring morning. It rained here last night, and this morning it's sunny, clear, and damp outside. The north Texas suburbs are pleasant when they're watered, and there are dozens of birds singing in the neighborhood. An old lady was walking her dogs and she stopped to chat for a moment. Last month, my wife and I built a new retaining wall in front (which I'll proudly boast looks quite nice), and the lady was complimenting our work. She said she wanted to do the same thing in her front yard and had to take her time like we did, adding a bit at a time. I thanked her for her kind words, we talked about it for a second, then she and her Chihuahuas were on their way. I enjoy my morning coffee outside, spending a few minutes quietly taking in the serene pleasure of God's creation and how He allowed me to better a few square yards of it.

When we're gone, somebody else will own this, somebody else will take credit for their own. Ditto that lake house that my wife I and I hope to one day build. Last week, I drove by the houses where I grew up in Minnesota. My parents sold one in 1969, and the other one in 1975. They are someone else's property now and only represent memories to me. Whoever owns each of them has done a good job at upkeep, and I hope they enjoy living there as much as we did. I also hope they can see that they are merely occupants of that property, tenants instead of permanent residents. Over the weekend, my wife and I did some work at a cemetery, placing flags on veterans' tombstones. This morning, sitting out in front of my temporary home, and I realized that even those grave-pieces of ground in which all those thousands of bodies are laid are simply temporary homes. All those dead will one day rise to be judged, then will depart for wherever they will reside in eternity. Between now and then there is living and dying, and leaving our things for others to use as they will. All this is meaningless without living in the acknowledged grace of God. It is a chasing after the wind even on a pleasant Texas spring morning.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 May 2012

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 20 and 21.

First comes hating life, then comes despair. If you or I put our faith in the ways of the world, then the world will invariably let us down. Maybe you're the husband who seeks other relationships because he's immature and feeling unfulfilled; maybe you're the wife who feels the same and wishes her husband understood. Maybe you're the school kid who thinks that, if you just get all A's, then everything will be fine and you won't feel bad about things anymore. Maybe you're the frustrated worker who feels that a promotion will make up for all those times when you felt you didn't get credit enough. Maybe you're a pastor who just can't understand why more people aren't flocking to your Sunday services.

Maybe you're you or me.

I'm no PhD but I'm betting there's a dissertation in studying the process from obsession to rejection/hatred through despair. It seems to be something like the process of grieving where we stage from denial through anger, bargaining, and depression until we finally reach acceptance. Perhaps there is some corollary to how we transition from sin through forgiveness. We do something wrong or desire something we shouldn't, and when we get it, we hate the world for what 'it did to us.' It wouldn't take long for that to evolve into despair.

You know, it's a shame it has to be that way. God transitions our sins from our confessing them to being immediately forgiven. There are no in-between stages; there are no steps you need to land on for total forgiveness. We repent, we are forgiven. There's nothing more involved and there's nothing more to do: that's simply how God does it. We're the ones who muddy up the waters and muddle the process.

I think it's a shame because the vestiges of our sins stick with us. We make ourselves own them even after we've let them go, even after God has taken them away. They are part of our past, and while we don't need to even think about them or be defined by them any longer, in this world that still happens. We still meet people who know us way back when, or our memories bubble up, or the enemy attacks. The world is still full of reminders of our days gone by and it is constantly trying to drag us back into them. I think one of the most common ways that happens is through despair.

We are constantly reminded that our work is for nothing, that we're never good enough. If we've put our faith, hope and trust in what we do (instead of what He did), then we're constantly disappointed. After we've met our goal, there's always another unfulfilled goal. When we have money, there's always more money to be made. When we're hooked on relationships, there's always the next one. When we shop for solace, there's always another bargain. Pick your pet sin: the process is similar.

The common denominator in all those things is us, and within us is our clinging to that sin. That sin can't save, redeem or make us happy. It can only make us hate life, then lead to eventual despair. I think it becomes easy to wallow in that despair, to deepen it, when we open ourselves to the true thought that, when we die, all we have will go to somebody else. Everything we work for, everything that we thought would make us happy, becomes someone else's property. The girl moves on, finds another guy. Our home is just another house to be sold to some stranger. Somebody else gets our treasured belongings. All that worry, work, angst, and faith that we put into making those things special doesn't mean much.

And that's ok.

It's ok because we are meant for more, and we were meant for more in the middle of all that despair. Remember, when God takes away that worry, work, angst and misplaced faith, He takes it away immediately and forever. Our great misfortune becomes His greater glory and our greatest blessing. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I

know: it's that whole religious speech, that whole believer-angle and Christian thing. What about ME? What about how bad I feel because things haven't worked out the way I want? What about my feelings?

What about them? Here's a heart-felt offer: let me carry that for you for awhile. Let me do what Christ would do for you and help you out so you can take some time to regenerate in Him. Put down your cares, open up to Him, and let somebody help. You'll be surprised how quickly hatred and despair can turn to forgiveness and peace.

That won't happen, however, if we keep putting our faith in the world. We live in this world and we're always going to be challenged by it. The tempter hasn't changed his ways in millennia, and he won't be doing so now. If we keep ourselves mired in the things that have made us unhappy, hating, or despairing, then we're never going to really understand the true peace that God offers. It's the point of this verse, the missing ingredient that contrasts the hopelessness that Ecclesiastes outlines. You won't have to look far for it: you'll find it at the foot of the cross.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 31 May 2012

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 22 – 23.

“Every hand’s a winner and every hand’s a loser, and the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.” That’s Kenny Rogers; “the Gambler.” You know that song. It’s the one about a sad, lonely man who meets a gambler on an overnight train. The man talks with the gambler, who offers him wise nuggets of advice before he himself gets the best that he could hope for.

Isn’t it another way of looking at these verses? A different spin, perhaps, with a bit of realist, humanist cynicism thrown in. The man uses the gambler’s advice to improve his lot in life. “In his final words I found an ace that I could keep.” I bet the final refrain is playing in your head as you read this.

If you work all the days of your life and your focus is only on you, your work will never be done. You and I are works in progress. So are the people in Burkina Faso, Uruguay, Bangladesh, South Florida, and other seemingly backward places. If you have breath in your lungs, your mission is still in progress and your life, your spirit, your attitude, your experience base are still in progress. For that to continue, we work. We continue working and we continue striving.

If that’s as good as it gets, you’re on a one-way death trip. That’s one of my favorite sayings, you know: “life is a one-way death trip.” It’s very realistic, very Gambler-esque. Keep working, keep improving, keep striving all the days of your life and, when all that is done, you will die.

Gee, happy Thursday!

Even at night, your mind won’t rest. I can’t tell you how many nights I’ve woke up and my mind has been immediately racing, immediately on the go full of thoughts that I can’t seem to slow down. Thankfully, I can honestly say I don’t worry nearly as much as I used to; I gave up the habit and beat it back with prayer. Yet I’ll also honestly say that my thoughts still sometimes ramble at night and that isn’t conducive to healthy rest. Sometimes I don’t pray or I forget to pray; I get wrapped up in riding the thought-train. I replay things I did in the day, or let guilt creep in over things long in the past. I fret about things coming up that I don’t want to do, or even small tasks that I’ve procrastinated into tomorrow. Thinking about money issues, fantasizing about dreams I want to make true, fretting about my kids in school, wondering how I can better reach out to my wife and ease her burdens at work, kicking myself for not finishing that project (or project plan), regrets over how I’ve treated people. Even at night my mind does not rest.

Even at night my mind does not rest when I succumb to the temptation of thinking that it is about me, or that I’m in this thing alone. The best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep, yet every morning I wake up, unrested with another day ahead of me. There is no rest for the mind of the wicked...

...if you let it be so.

There’s no reason that it has to be so, you know. There is no reason why your work in progress can’t progress towards something better. There is no reason why the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.

Before going all Joel Osteen on you, let’s just leave it at “go with God.” If you go to my mom’s church, every week they close the service singing a hymn whose refrain is “go with God.” Go with God today in your walk at work, in your homework with the kids, in your talks with the wife or husband. Go with God when you’re faltering, when you’re hurting, when you’re tempted, when you’re lonely. Go with God when it’s going well, too, because that’s when it’s most tempting to think you can go without Him. Go with God in giving thanks, offering praise, doing your best. Go with God because that’s the antidote to which Solomon is silently alluding when he

loudly opines that all things humanist are meaningless. There is no reason to not go with God. Indeed, in the face of a life hopeless and meaningless without His peace, to not go with God is the only unreasonable action.

When you walk without God and rely only on yourself, you eventually find that everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Eventually you see that “every hand’s a winner and every hand’s a loser and the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.” Eventually, all you have is a hand full of ashes.

There’s no reason for that. There is a better way. The next time you hear Kenny Rogers, remember that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 4 June 2012

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 24 – 26.

Finally, we come to the end of chapter 2. Three thousand years ago, a wise philosopher king in Judea recorded his observations on that state of mankind in relationship to his godlessness. He spent forty-four verses in two chapters of words he spoke to a scribe pinpointing the true hopelessness of all things worldly. Read through these two verses: they sum up the two previous chapters, and they do so in a way that isn't so oblique. Here, for the first time in the entire book, King Solomon does more than just allude to God as the real source of meaning in life. Before now, God has been the unspoken, silent contrast. Until now, the Lord Almighty (more specifically, the absence of Him in someone's life) has been unmentioned as the ultimate wise humanist pursued all things worldly and found them to be totally devoid of meaning. Here, for the first time, Solomon says that God is the source and fount of all things, but especially all things good.

Yesterday, in church, my friend Mark (the minister) posed the question "what is church?" Repeatedly, he discussed the Greek word "ecclesia" which means, literally, church. After looking it up (online of course) I found that the word 'ecclesiastes' means, of course, the title of this book of the Bible. Another meaning for it I found was 'preacher.' These are words from a preacher about the church. Sitting there in church while my friend, who leads a church, I listened to my friend talk about the church while I pondered the meaning of a word that means 'preacher about the church. The point my friend made (and I encourage you to look up the sermon at <http://www.watersedgefrisco.com>) was that the church isn't a building or a place or even a thing. The church is us, we believers, living our lives in the Savior, in God. The church is all of us sinners who are made saints by grace we didn't deserve and can't ever earn. The church isn't a place to go: the church is being. The three thousand year old preacher, preaching about the church, is talking about the characteristics of a group that is instead of about a group the way it should be. All those words about life being meaningless, hopeless nothing without God? They were preaching about the church, you and me, the being.

Is that surprising? After all, He who instituted it goes by the simple but miraculously mysterious name of "I AM." And is it surprising, then, that this book, which is entitled 'preacher about the church' talks about how all things, all ways, all goals in which we (of the church) live are hopeless, worthless and meaningless unless they are 100% centered in the God who surpasses all understanding.

How funky is that?

In the service, Mark reiterated a point he has made before: if you think a Christian church is a group of holy people whose actions are all wiped out, then you've got it all wrong. If you come to church thinking you can get a clean slate and go on to live out life totally anew, absolved of all wrongdoing you've ever done, then you misunderstand. This is a hard, damn world and we live hard, damn lives, and so many folks look at church and are befuddled, even offended, at the idea that people can get together and live in ways the defy that hard damn world. They think churches are full of good people, maybe people too good for them. And they've got it wrong.

And they've got it right too.

What do you call a group of lying, cheating, cursing, philandering, scheming, deceitful, unholy, struggling, failing awful people? Congress? A Hollywood movie shoot? Maybe. More to the point, you call them 'the church.' The church struggles but the church is 100% forgiven of all its wrongs. The church lives in the damned old world but it isn't of that world. When we're good, it's because we've been re-made that way. And you're part of the 'we.' To the great I AM, you are special, unique, and amazingly loved.

We are the church when we are centered in Christ, living our lives as He empowers. When you're part of the church, you do indeed get the opportunity to turn your back on the old ways, on the ways that correctly labeled you as a lying, cheating, cursing (and the rest) kind of person. You're a sinner, but you're made a saint. There's nothing about what you have done before that means you have to be that kind of person again. True freedom to change, real hope and change you can believe in, starts with God and only God. Anything else is just a shabby imitation.

Worse, it's a shabby imitation that is hopeless, worthless, and meaningless. To all of us God gives blessings. To those who reject Him, he blesses them with the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. If working, struggling, partying, living it up, saving, investing, planting, earning and whatever you do to use your talents in this world is as good as it gets, then your life is meaningless. Store up your millions, even billions, and buy a new Rolls every month. Wear the finest clothes, lay a grand on the bar every night, get all the best stuff, and do whatever your wealth can buy you and when you're done, go look in the mirror. You're still no better than me and I'm not better than the worst this world has to offer. All your 'stuff' is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What's more, to those sinners who reject him – and I believe that's each of us at points in our lives – God continually gives those blessings as outreach, as invitations to come back home, as love letters from him, to us, and about the church.

He gives us ecclesia and ecclesiastes, a preacher about the church. He gives that to us because we are the church.

If you're part of the church, you're part of a living, thriving, growing being. God Immanuel, the great Jehovah, Yahweh, the Triune One and, as they said in 'The Adjustment Bureau' "The Chairman," lives in you and through you. He sees through your eyes. He reads these words, feels from your fingertips, and speaks to your heart in His own Spirit. You aren't some host onto which a parasite is grafted. You're a living, sentient, vital, independent but struggling, failing being whose eyes, blood and sinew are in-dwelt by the spirit of Life itself. You're one of billions, yet to God you are extra special, most unique. The church is you and you are part of the church. Today, 'preach' about that to a world that really needs to hear it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 5 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1 – 8.

Admit it: these words are stuck in your head and, unless you're an aficionado of 1960s music, you may not exactly remember why. Let me help you: to everything, turn, turn, turn. Pete Seeger took the words of Ecclesiastes 3 and paired them with song. In 1965, Roger McGuinn and David Crosby recorded the best known version; nearly 50 years later, that folk-rock, pre-psychadelic tune is a staple of oldies stations everywhere. I guess that proves the staying power of wise words and good music. The song is taken entirely from the book of Ecclesiastes, specifically these first 8 verses. Yes, we'll individually discuss them over the coming days, but for today let's take them altogether, just like the Byrds did.

My parents didn't care much for the music of the 1960s, and they had little good to say about the hippie culture, the drug culture, and the disrespect for authority that came out as a result of that decade. I remember my Dad listening to this song one day, though. We were driving back from a day trip to Washington DC and the song came on the radio. We listened to it and I remember him saying that it was taken from a book of the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes. At the time, I knew nothing about that. He was scornful that the hippies of the mid-60s would have used the words of Scripture to make pop music. Those few minutes of conversation with him have stuck with me for most of 40 years, especially since I like the song (even if Pete Seeger did write it).

But, you know, what better source for good music could you find? I would much rather hear poetic Scripture than the glorification of LSD or things like that. Not only, but the particular verses chosen seem keenly appropriate to the time in which they were popularized. Before the country was lit on fire by the radicals, before the Vietnam War became really bad, before the riots got out of control, before authority broke down (or, more appropriately, was broken down), and before society turned on its ear, someone took a few minutes to pen a song using ancient poetic words of God to describe how there is a time for everything.

Fifty years later, even three thousand years later, the words are still true. Stay online all day long and you'll still find there is a season for every activity under heaven. Vote for Obama, Romney, or any of the other less than stellar choices this fall and there is still a time to tear and a time to mend. Even if you've never sowed seeds in a garden, you see there is a time to plant and a time to uproot. Microwave your food, turn on the satellite TV, remotely lock your car using that push button on your key fob, or set your iPhone wake up alarm and there will still be a time to mourn and a time to dance. You get the picture.

Over the years, I've read these words time and time again. They're commonly spoken at both weddings and funerals, and I find great comfort in that, and in them. Go ahead and read them all through again. When you do, I think you get a keen insight into the beauty that is God. I love to write poetry. I keep a running book of poetry I've written that now comprises nearly 200 pages. To me, writing verse helps me express emotions and feelings in ways that other words simply don't fully convey.

I don't believe I could ever write poetry as simply beautiful as these 8 verses. It takes a master craftsman, a true wordsmith, to use the King's language to such effect. In them, there are simple contrasts, grouping for effect, a string of comparisons that is adequate without being tedious, and the common used as eloquence. It's not just the song that sticks in your heart: it's the deeply meaningful words. And this after reading so many before them about how everything in life is meaningless. To everything turn, turn, turn.

And as things turn, we get a brief, brilliant glimpse at just how there truly is a time for everything. There is a time to live and a time to die. When we fall in love, it's as if that special feeling and time could only happen

when it did; it would only fit in that particular magical moment. When someone dies, once we are past the grief, we see that their time was complete, that we couldn't conceive of them dying at another time even as we did not want them to. When we are promoted, fired, gladdened, relieved, saddened, worried, or any other sensation, isn't it true that we are those things at just the right time? Could we truly conceive being that way at any other time? Every moment is unique, and every moment is used for God's good purpose, by His mysterious but loving design. There is a time for everything. Once more, turn, turn, turn.

For everything in life there is a time, a God's good gift of time. Time is something He gave us, something we need. Even in creation, He built time not for Him but for us, so we could have ways to relate the moments of our lives and how they are all beautiful gifts from above. As long as there has been an earth there have been day and night, sun and stars. Sure, we don't know what heaven will be like until we get there, but if heaven is simply a remade Earth one day, then maybe it's a safe bet to think that, even out of time, we will still have those functions of it that are the day and night. As they turn, turn and turn, we are gifted to know that the God who gives meaning to life also gives His meaning to each time for everything.

Read through the eight verses again, and maybe hum the song to yourself, and then maybe say a prayer, thanking God for whatever time you're in and wherever this time may take you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 6 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.. Ecclesiastes 3, verse 1.

King James: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

The Message: "There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth."

New American Standard: "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven."

New Life Translation: "There is a special time for everything. There is a time for everything that happens under heaven."

New Living Translation: "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven."

The Contemporary English Version: "Everything on earth has its own time and its own season."

And, finally, from a translation called 'the Complete Jewish Bible:' "For everything there is a season, a right time for every intention under heaven."

If you had to pick a 'most comfortable' translation, which would you pick? Me, I think I would go with the New American Standard version because I think it best captures the essence of what this verse means to me. I said yesterday that these verses from Ecclesiastes 3 are sometimes read at funerals, and I find comfort in that and in them. When someone you love dies, you search for meaning, trying to find some kind of reason. Even if they are old and have lived a long life, even if it is expected after a long illness, even if it isn't surprising that someone would be dead (because of the way they lived), when people we love pass away we search for meaning. We want to know why. Sometimes, there is no reason why, and sometimes it seems like such a callous thing to say "it was God's plan" (because it is and it is).

Dying is easy. It's the living that's difficult. And let's get this on the table: even when we know that there is a time for everything, it's still difficult. Tell those words to somebody who just lost their job, or whose house burned down, wife dropped divorce papers, or someone whose child has leukemia. In this world made for us by a loving God, there are still terrible things that happen, whirlwinds of sin and hurt that careen into our lives when we least expect or even deserve it.

Still, don't let those realities cloud out the comforting beauty of this simple, one-verse poem from God. I find it comforting because all too often in this crazy world I'm all too aware of how small I really am. I do my part just like you do, but despite my bragging nature, it doesn't take much to cut me down to size. I get frustrated, depressed, anxious, or stressed out, and all this usually because of my own poor planning. When that happens, I find it comforting to know that, even on the bad days, there is a time for everything. The bad days will happen and that means that good days will happen as well: all of them in God's good time.

What's more, there are appointed times for everything, and everything that happens is under the dominion of heaven. That means it really is under the dominion of God. That whole thing about Him keeping His eye on the sparrow and knowing the exact number of hairs on your head? It's really true. Those things are under heaven, and there are appointed times for them. For the sparrow, it is but the space of a few seasons; for you or I, it's typically many years. During those years, we go through our ups and downs but, generally, there are seasons for when things happen. Growth in spring, dormancy in the winter. It's more than that, though. There are seasons for mourning our dead, celebrating victories, laughing with friends, and crying with them too. There are always times for us to do our best. It's a right and proper thing to do things when we should, when it is simply the right time to do them.

It's right and proper because it's during a season under heaven.

My wife works harder than anybody I know. She's the director of administration at a private pre-school here in North Texas. Every morning, she is at the school by 6 AM and every day she gets out no earlier than 5. During her days, she is responsible for all staffing, financials, supplies, admissions, and 'tactical' operation of the school. Her school, part of a national corporation of 20-some other schools by the same name, is drastically understaffed (especially in the management functions) because the corporation runs on a very tight margin; it isn't one of the rich fat cat companies you hear about even though their clientele is distinctively upper income. Nobody sees how hard she works, or how even at home her mind is always on the job, or how she starts getting calls from teachers every evening saying that "my great aunt's dog in Arkansas is having an anxiety attack and I need to be there for that." Nobody (except you now) knows that she gets paid beans to do all this but that she throws all of herself into the job and into the people every day. She does it because it's her job, her dream job in fact. She does it because she makes a difference in her calling.

And when it's been a particularly tough day for her, it's very easy to lose sight of the fact that, for her job, there is a time for everything and that what she does every day is important. God put her where she is as part of a mission to provide good care and education to the kids and families. She is working in season, working in this very stressful and high impact position because her activities are part of a greater design under heaven. God is not impartial nor is He inactive in her day to day work life. For everything she does, there is a reason and there is a time as part of this season under heaven.

Like that New American Standard translation, I find that to be a very comfortable (and comforting) thing when it gets really rough for her. She inspires me because He inspires her at all the right times.

No matter how you translate the words, they mean something good. We can speak different languages and even interpret the same language differently yet they still mean something extraordinarily good. I once wrote a book about a man who was both simple and complex. I called him 'an extraordinary ordinary man.' To know that there is a time and a purpose for everything that happens in this world helps to make the ordinary extraordinary. Like my wife. She's an extraordinary ordinary purpose working in her time under God. Just like you. And that is the most special gift of all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 7 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1- 2.

Last Saturday, I planted tomatoes. A few years ago I built a raised garden in front of my house, and every year since then we've filled it with annuals; marigolds, begonias, the like. We wanted to plant azaleas this year, but we haven't found any yet. So, when I saw a good deal on a tomato plant, I bought it. I'm revealing here (my wife doesn't know this yet...ok, she'll know now) that I'm thinking of planting a few more, and maybe some beans along the edge of the garden. This year we could have vegetables growing instead of flowers. That might seem odd, but it also might look full and be fun to grow.

I like to garden. I've always found it to be restful, satisfying self-therapy to work with the dirt. There's something rejuvenating about making a bare patch of grand fertile and planting beautiful things there. It's even more fun to plant vegetables and watch them grow, then harvest the product of your good work. If you haven't had them in awhile, maybe you've forgotten how truly amazing home grown fresh veggies are compared to what we buy in the stores. And at the end of a season, when annual plants wither, there's something satisfying about pulling them out, or chopping them into compost. There's something truly wondrous about preparing the soil to receive good seed again next year to start the whole cycle over again.

That's one of the most amazing things about God's love, about this creation He made: every year in every place there is a time to plant and a time to uproot. There is a time to be born and a time to die. Every year, the organic lives, dies and decays to become part of the rich soil in which the next crop can take good root. It's very 'Lion King' and 'circle of life.' Out of the remains of death comes the stuff to build good life, harvest a healthy fruit. I think that's why it's so satisfying for me to garden, to take sandy, unproductive soil and build it up with manure, compost and the like into something that can produce life. We can work the soil, plant the seeds, water and nurture them, and we can even explain what happens at every step of this process right down to a molecular level. But we can't create life. We can't explain how the miracle of life happens. Only God can do that, and I have often thought He could do it while looking us in the eye with a wink and a smile.

And have you considered the miracle of death? Maybe that sounds strange, but it really is a miracle. God instituted it as a punishment for our sins, as a consequence for the evil that was done by our ancestors. Or did He? Maybe He gave us a miracle instead. Before death, life on Earth had been in harmony with God. Man went along with evil and separated himself from that harmony, so God instituted death – he allowed it to touch all things in His creation – as a way to remedy this separation. Man, tainted with the terrible tragedy that is sin and evil couldn't be in harmony with a holy and perfect God any longer, at least not while he was in that sinful form. So God allowed this thing, this destroyer, to come along and renew. Through death man could be reunited in a place out of time where God's holiness and love could be fully shared with him again. Where life would be brought forth in birth, life would again be brought forth in death. From immediately after man's fall, God promised true redemption and then He fulfilled it by allowing His Son, Himself really, to endure death and renew true life into human life.

That's a miracle. That's the foundation of real hope for all who believe in that Son. One of my favorite movie scenes is in the third 'Lord of the Rings' movie where the hobbit and Gandalf, the wizard, think they are facing death in the great siege at Minis Tirith. The hobbit asks Gandalf about death, if it is the end, and the great wizard responds that death is but a transition, a doorway into something so spectacularly wonderful that we can't even comprehend it in our current form.

Like I said, a miracle. I believe in that miracle. For all things, there are times to live and die, to plant and uproot. It isn't just something in the movies. Death awaits all of us, but if we believe, we are simply being returned to God's good soil to rejoin the circle of life. In His time, body and spirit will be one again and then the real life will begin.

This summer, I planted those tomatoes pretty late. If I had planted them in March, we'd be getting ready to enjoy our first fresh summer tomatoes here in the next few weeks. One of our favorite summer dishes is tomatoes and cottage cheese. That just screams 'summer' to me, and it's even more satisfying when you've just picked a fresh Beefsteak tomato (or better yet, an heirloom variety) off the vines in your garden. For all things, there are times to live and die, to plant and uproot. It isn't just something in the movies. It happens all around us. Next time you look at a tree, a houseplant, or good food growing in somebody's garden, remember that it's a miracle given to us in its proper time.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 8 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 3.

I was once a warrior. I proudly served in the US Air Force from 1985 through 1996 (and another 2 years in the AF Reserve after that). Much of what I know and how I work today I learned during those years. They helped make me into who I am today. I'm intensely proud of my service and the fact that I served. Many days I wish I hadn't voluntarily separated from the military, but I think back on when I did and remember that I made the best decision I could at the time.

Knowing that (so you know where I come from), let me ask you this question: does this verse condone war?

I have many friends who are anti-military, pacifist and anti-war. Personally, I have always had low regard for those outlooks but high regard for the character of people who can honorably maintain them. It takes courage to stand up and say "I don't agree with that." One of my favorite movies is "Friendly Persuasion," which is a Gary Cooper movie about southern Indiana Quakers during the Civil War. The Quakers, Shakers and Amish (and even today's Wisconsin Synod Lutherans) are all strongly pacifist. When I was a member of the WELS, I was surprised to learn that pastors in that synod are informally encouraged to not serve in the military. There are many reasons for that – no, that church isn't unpatriotic. There are other reasons – but there is a strong vein of pacifism running through the organization.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll admit that I struggle with that. In this time of war, I wrestle with the concept that all are free because some serve, that some fight our battles and that, because of it, all of us don't have to. That's a blessing of our living in a country where serving one's country is a freedom we can choose or decline. It doesn't mean that you're unpatriotic or unbelieving if you don't serve: it simply means your gifts are useful elsewhere. For most people I believe this is true; the rest run for political office.

But it still doesn't answer the question: does this verse mean God condones war? The Bible is replete with stories about conflict. To take possession of His promised land, the Israelites made gruesome war on the inhabitants. Above all else earthly, King David was a general leading powerful armies. The soldiers who executed Jesus were soldiers of occupation who, only a few decades before, had overrun 'modern' Israel. And the very last book of the Bible, Revelation, talks about how war will bring about the end of all things here; how God would use war to purge His creation once and for all of all sin.

If God doesn't condone war, He certainly allows it. That, you know, may be the biggest 'duh' statement you read this week.

No, the verse doesn't condone war and it doesn't give praise (or scorn) to those of a martial bent. I believe what it does is to acknowledge that all things occur under God's good timeline, including killing, healing, tearing down and building up. Just as He allows us to commit our other sins, so He allows war in His creation we made imperfect. I think there is tacit acknowledgement that some among us will fight in war and some will help to heal from it. Either way, both happen under God's oversight because both use God-given talents.

Notice, too, that the writer pairs killing with healing and tearing down with building up. You'll remember that these first 8 verses use those opposites to demonstrate contrast. Here I think it's especially helpful to note them. Before conflict, there is rising tension, degenerating relations. During conflict all hell can break loose. After conflict? Afterwards is the time to rebuild, to build back, to do better. Ditto with killing. Something drives us to kill, gives us the motivation to do it. For those who kill and those who have known someone killed there is time to heal afterwards. Sure, that's easier said than done; no simple words like mine can make it easier. But there is still the time – and the opportunity – for it. That's a blessing.

It's a central blessing that God wanted us to note. He sometimes uses the terrible thing of war to bring about change for a better future. Who can say with a straight face that Germany would have been better off as the Third Reich, or that South Korea is worse off than it's sibling to the North? Yes, there is still so much struggle in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that they are functioning democracies now is undeniably better than the brutal dictatorships they were before. You're a fool to think that God is indifferent in human affairs, or that He doesn't lay the groundwork for something better through the violent reality of war. Once again, He takes our sin and turns it around for His greater good.

Last week, my wife and I watched "Hatfields & McCoys." We really enjoyed it, and we spent some time after talking about how ironic it was that McCoy, who had been so devout, ended up faithless and desolate while Hatfield, who had been humanly brutal was a believer in God when he died. Their story started in the Civil War when Hatfield, a Confederate officer, deserted after seeing the futility of the Confederate cause. The brutal 20 year feud that followed resulted from this seemingly cowardly act. Yet Hatfield was a realist, too, and he made a choice to spare his own life when others would surely have sacrificed it. Cowardly? Perhaps, but the movie also made it somewhat understandable.

Sometimes I struggle with that too when I think back about 'divorcing' the military. I got out by choice; nobody forced me. I worked in a highly sensitive career field that had been politicized and was (I thought) being managed by incompetent leaders who didn't understand what they were doing. The men & women I served with, my immediate peers, friends and supervisors? You couldn't ask for a better & more talented, more devoted group of people. The generals and civilians who commanded the force back then? Incompetent. I'd had enough and cashed in my chips, thinking I could do better with the rest of my life than I could do in the remaining 9 years until retirement. Since then, I've been blessed with a rich and successful life even when it's been full of up's and down's. Still, I wonder what it would have been like if, like so many of my friends, I put in a full 20 years and made a career out of it. Today I'm very proud to have been part of it all. We not only condoned war: we prepared for it. That's what the military is supposed to do. We did our best as God gave us the ability to see what that was.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 4.

My oldest daughter is getting married this year. In exactly 5 months and 27 days, Miss Terry will become Mrs. Tew. We are already knee-deep in wedding planning, and to be honest, I'm a little sick of it. It isn't that I don't want them to get married: she couldn't have picked a better man and he's already so much a part of my family that I think of him as another son. It isn't that I think it's wrong. They've been dating for years now and are totally committed to each other. No, it isn't that I don't want to let my little girl go. She moved out three years ago and has succeeded on her own. And it isn't that I'm not interested in the plans. We're having the wedding at a beautiful venue where everything is taken care of and we'll all have a great time. I want it to go well, so we're doing it right.

No, I'm sick of it because, to me, it just doesn't seem like it's time yet. Get me a little closer and it'll seem more like time. The date is still far enough away to seem like it's in the fog of the future. I don't begrudge oldest daughter her wedding dreams. Every girl dreams of the white dress, the full church, the carriage of pumpkins pulled by former white mice; every girl wants to be a princess for her wedding day and mine is no different. To me, though, it just isn't time. It's too far out for me to grasp. My calendar for next week isn't complete, so putting something on the docket for six months from now seems kind of far away.

Thank God for people who plan better than yours truly. Thank God my daughter, my wife, and a wedding planner at the venue are all heavily involved. I do project planning for a living so by the weekend, I'm a bit done in on it. Thank God that my wife is a great planner, and that our daughter learned well from her. Without them, we wouldn't have put money down, had our tuxedo fittings, have the dress tailored, and involved daughter and (aspiring) son-in-law who are already working on invitations.

And thank God He knows better, that He gave us times for things. The times He gives us are the proper times, even when we don't understand why or when.

I think of the play "Our Town." It's one of my favorite plays, even if it is darkly pessimistic. Back in high school, we read that play in class; I got to read the role of the Stage Manager. One lesson that comes from Mr. Wilder's play is that there is a time for everything, and that we should appreciate every time for what it is. It's a three-act play, with the first act being relatively light, capturing the liveliness of youth, the second act taking on depth as the main characters struggle with decisions that will affect them forever, and a third act in which we contemplate the meaning of life itself. There are times to weep and laugh, and times to mourn and dance. High school, marriage, crisis, pain, eternity: in the lives of the characters, there is a time for everything and everything to be enjoyed.

Very Ecclesiastical, I'd say.

Very much something I'll keep in mind as we careen through the next few months of planning. Right now is a time to work, to save up and prepare for the celebration at the end of the year. In-between now and then are 25 Sundays in which to go to church, over 125 work days, birthdays for my wife and I both, a vacation in Arizona, a bridal shower in September, the election, six mortgage payments, the start of Christmas shopping, and a Thanksgiving day on which I really think we aren't going to cook at all (we'll go out for a fancy dinner instead; hello Ruth's Chris). Every one of those days, from midnight to midnight, will be chock full of activity, of us using our talents (I hope) to the best of our ability. In every one of them, the God of all eternity who came to us both as the mighty pillar of fire, as the gentle whisper to Elijah, and as the kind Son named Jesus will be present for every second, encouraging us to look, listen, love and live (thank you Pastor Mark). Each one of those days will be filled with moments of individual celebration, individual challenge, and individual grace. Each one will present itself as appropriate for that time. Whether we weep, laugh, mourn, or dance depends on what's going on in the moment.

Whether we do those things without God depends on us. He'll be there in them. How about we be still for a few minutes and just know that He is?

I'm looking forward to walking my girl down the aisle even as it still seems pretty far away. Sure, it'll be here before we know it; all too true. Until then, we all get to go along with plans being set in motion because people with more foresight (and better fashion sense) than me are hard at work planning out the North Texas wedding of the year. I know already that it will be a time to weep, laugh, and dance, and that's something of which I could never be sick. If there is mourning before we get there, then that too will happen in God's good time. Either way, thanks to some hard work and some loving effort, we'll be ready.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 5.

Two of my kids recently went through breakups. I won't reveal all their personal details, but I'll say just enough to make a point. One breakup was from a relationship that was really just budding; it had only endured a few weeks, yet my daughter was very disappointed when the guy she had been seeing backed away. The other breakup was with my son, who lost his 6 month relationship with a high school sweetheart. It hit him pretty hard; I suspect he was more into her than she was into him, and he's done the hard thing of breaking off all contact.

To quote the Traveling Wilburys: it's alright.

These things happen, and it hurts when they do. An encouraging thing to remember when they do happen is that there is a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain. Hurt won't last; helping does. In good time, you will gather and embrace again.

You and I have each lost friends. It's been many months since I've talked with or heard from some of the people I used to be close to. Our relationships became dysfunctional, and we were both to blame for that. It was sad, but those friendships ended and I don't know what they're doing now. Sometimes I wonder about it and wish things hadn't come to what they did. When that happens, I think of this verse. For everything there is a time, including the times to scatter and refrain.

Some of that is healthy. If a relationship becomes one-sided, dependent, or hurtful then it can be a healthy, good thing to re-examine it. Maybe that means that the best way is to back away from it, get your bearings, cut away the extra and determine how you really feel. Most of all, find your center: seek God. At the times when we're most vulnerable and hurting most from others, seek God and place Him in the center of wherever you are. Orbit around Him and watch how the good starts to flow. All these are the healthy ways to let good come from bad.

It's soothing to remember that for everything there is a proper time, including times when friendships and relationships end. That's how God designed things. Several times in the course of 23 years, my marriage has almost ended; several times this happened because of things we bottled up or things I did. Several times these things occurred at their proper time and it looked very much as if the time to embrace had turned to the time to refrain, to scatter instead of gather. The last time was THE last time because, finally, without someone preaching at me or us, we sought God. My wife did so first, seeking God to protect her heart and protect her loved ones. It didn't take long for me to see that she was doing the right and best thing, and I learned to follow suit. To say we're closer than ever is an understatement. She is the richest blessing in my world.

Letting God take control of my heart, my emotions and my future meant letting go of hurt and also letting go of some friendships. I'd be lying if I said I didn't sometimes miss talking to people, but I've made new friendships since. It was time to scatter stones, to refrain from further sharing. In return for that, God blessed me richly, with the kind of marriage I've always wanted and those new friendships that are always enriching. Does this mean that faith is some kind of demand/response or action/reward thing? Of course not. What it shows is the fruit of faith, how God promises to bless us even more richly if we simply turn over our cares to Him and get out of His way. Sometimes you have to get on the other side of doing that to see that He blesses us all along, even when we can't see it. Home, safety, friends, daily victories, daily small blessings: all of them sustain us even through the bad times. Those bad times really never do last, and when we scatter the stony hard anchors of the past we don't always see how it is actually preparation to gather God's fresh new blessings up ahead.

That's a refrain I'll embrace. I'll say it over and over again because it's always true.

In the case of my kids and their recent breakups, I'll say it even more devoutly. The bad times don't last and what you've left behind doesn't shine nearly as bright as what's good just up the road. It means having the thankful faith to get through today, to scatter and refrain so that you can be ready to gather and embrace.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 6.

I'm a tenacious collector. You could almost say I am a kind of hoarder. If there is an empty shelf, I'll find a way to fill it. Ask my wife and she'll tell you that I'm better than I used to be, but if you go in my garage you will find the shelves filled with boxes of papers, mementos and whatnot that I can't seem to find the time to get rid of. More appropriate, to re-allocate. On the massive wood shelves (that I built from scrap wood the summer we moved in here) in that garage are boxes of school papers, cuttings, drawings and so forth that I have saved for years in the hopes of one day scrapbooking them into keepsakes for my wife, myself and our kids. My mom did that for my sister and I, and it's something I'd like to do for my family. I simply haven't gotten around to doing them yet. Until that day comes, all that stuff sits in boxes.

My collections aren't that valuable; if you want to meet a valuable collection hoarder, go meet my mom. The things I collect have more sentimental value than anything. Books, DVDs, the occasional quarter, penny, nickel or dime; a few guns: they really aren't worth much in the long run but I enjoy them. What's more, most of it is organized, some even presentably so. My dad's old guns are in a display case on my wall (except for the Civil War musket; that's on the wall). The coin collections are on a shelf; the DVDs are organized and available for use; ditto all the books, many of which I've read.

I don't plan on moving any time soon, so it seems to me that the stuff I have is fine where it is. As I said, I enjoy it, and because it isn't harming anyone else, I consider my collecting to be in accordance with today's verse. There is always a time to search for new coins: I do so when they come through my hands. There is always time to keep them (so long as they don't interfere with parking a car in the garage). There is always a good time to enjoy these things when I'm being thankful for them. My mom is fond of saying that she enjoys sitting in her house, looking at her belongings, reminiscing. I guess this means that I'm getting older because I enjoy the same thing. I enjoy looking at these things, or using them and remembering where they came from, who they came from.

In this there is no harm so long as my doing it doesn't interfere with my relationships. When a relationship with God, my wife, my kids, even other friends is replaced by 'things,' well, Houston we have a problem. We should never put our things over people. Those things may disappear, but they aren't living, animate, and they aren't more important than those things. I pity people who don't understand this simple truth.

The flip side of all this is that there are also times to give up and times to throw away. When we do anything that takes the place of God or interferes with living a life that can bring glory to Him, it's time to give up or throw away. Sadly, this is the case with dysfunctional relationships as well. If we need to search for something and we legitimately can't find it, there is no dishonor or impropriety in giving up. Think of that phrase: "giving" up. Giving is a conscious action; it is pro-active, not passive. We give our time in search of something, looking for something, gathering something. We also give of ourselves in stopping that pursuit. There is nothing ungodly in doing so. The key is to 'give' only what we can and should using faith as our measure. If we are holding onto belongings or the past, letting those determine things about us, we are doing something that takes us away from living in today. That's not what God intended for us to do.

Things that detract from our relationship with God and His people aren't good for us. They're no better than trash. If we'd throw away trash, then maybe it is a right thing to discard things that pull us away from Him. No, this isn't permission to use people as we would use things, simply to get what we need from them and then discard them. People aren't things or garbage, nor should we ever construe that it's Godly to treat them like trash. But if a relationship, a possession, or even a dream interferes with doing the right thing or doing what God is leading us to do, then it's proper to cast it aside. Yes, it's damn tough to do; no doubt about it. Don't we all know what it is to think about someone long after they're out of our lives? The best way to handle that is

through prayer, praying for them and praying for wisdom & guidance in moving forward, in giving ourselves to something better.

Easy to do with things we don't need anymore, or things that are broken. Those are usually headed for the landfill. Not so easy to do with relationships because the memories linger long after the people are gone. And it isn't even easy to do with belongings. I need look no farther than all those boxes in my garage to remind me that it's sometimes tough to let go. Still, I'm holding on to those keepsakes to hopefully do something better with them. I want to put them in order, cataloguing my kids life and my life in such a way that they can look back & show their kids who we were. As long as we do this with a Godly and honorable intent, I think it can be a pleasing thing for all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 14 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 7.

Yesterday a big hail storm moved through East Dallas. My daughter and I were driving home from an appointment in Corsicana, which is south of the city, and we skirted by the dark clouds just as they were beginning to gather. Today's morning news stories showed that baseball-sized hail did some serious damage to the cars, homes and businesses in that area. Please pray for all those affected.

But not just for them, you know. The other day I saw footage of my old home in Colorado Springs, where a massive hail storm caused similar havoc. If you live in that area, you get used to the idea that once a year or so, someplace in the Pike's Peak region will get slammed with a foot of hail. It has to do with how weather patterns collide along the Front Range. A friend sent me a picture of a car that was surrounded by so much hail that the rain falling had no place to run off, so it flooded the car in an otherwise empty parking lot. I feel bad for the owner because their property got torn up for no better reason than they unknowingly parked in the wrong place.

It's summer in the American west: expect things like this. Expect them because this is one of nature's times to tear things up. If we want to explore the ecclesiastically true reason, we can attribute it back to the consequences of Eden. That's a bit deeper than I want to dive this morning. Even as it's true, I'll be content to know that things like freak hailstorms happen when they do. Weather patterns, internal updrafts, and the laws of heating, cooling and condensation all play into the fact that, when the hail gets heavy enough to outweigh the wind velocity, it simply falls where it does.

For those affected, now is the time to mend. I hear roofers and auto insurance adjusters are busy today in the Lakewood part of the Metroplex.

For everything there is a time to tear and a time to mend. Just a few minutes ago, I had to mend a pair of shorts. Recently, I was heavier than I am today (I've lost most of 10 pounds in the last few weeks). My ample gut popped a button on a pair of shorts that I can now wear again thanks to the weight loss. To make that wearing possible, I had to sew on a new button. It's a time to mend.

And then there is the typical evening television show here at Chez Terry. Part of my wife's nightly 'download' routine is to watch shows on HGTV about renovation. She gets ideas on things we can do to our property, but it's also entertaining to watch them take something old and broken and transform it into something useful and attractive. You can't renovate a room without some demolition; out with the broken old and in with the usable new. The end result is that the property is restored, often into a better than its original condition.

Finally, there is my son's car. It's a junker of sorts, but it's the best we could afford at the moment. There is a radiator leak we can't quite pin down, he needs new posts on the dashboard switches that control the heater and blower, and there are typical old-car problems. You can't fix a broken car engine without removing some other parts. For his car, it will mean taking off the dashboard, getting under the hood to yank out a few broken hoses and such, and replacing parts that have simply worn out. The return he will get for this is an old car that has been made usable again. It will have more life to offer.

How true is verse 7, then! There truly are times to tear and mend, and isn't that also what God does with you and me? We're broken, often seemingly beyond repair. If you and I were machines, we might just have been ready for the junkyard. I won't speak for you, but I know I have some pretty heinous junk in my past, and I also know that I haven't always taken good care of the body with which He entrusted me. I've junked up my mind and my heart with a bunch of stuff that is worthless; I've junked up my body with unhealthy living like alcohol, bad food, laziness and smoke. I'm like the hailed up roof all torn up and trashed; I'm like the flooded car in the parking lot, sometimes made that way by choices that aren't always in my control. God doesn't let me just sit

around broken, though. He continually offers me ways to mend. He's like a mechanic who renovates old machines, or a doctor who binds up torn wounds. He doesn't let my crap from the past make me into anyone. He doesn't want me to be tomorrow. Forgiveness is an amazing thing because it is the start of fixing everything.

And in a contrasting thing that's especially difficult for me, sometimes silence is louder than words. I wonder why this particular contrast. If you read it, the words are poetic but out of place. What do silence and speech have to do with tearing and mending? Only everything. They apply if you think back that God works on us through His word. He teaches us about Himself through the lessons recorded in Scripture, then He uses those lessons to teach us how to believe, how to act, even what to say in our post-modern, post-faith world (where we're told we don't need God anymore). Best of all, I find that he teaches most when we're silent. One of the favorite Bible verses my wife and I have taken to telling each other is "be still and know that I am God." That's Psalm 46, verse 10. His words speak clearest to my tangled heart when I am simply silent, listening and absorbing.

Yeah, that's especially hard for a talkative cuss like me. It's great, Godly advice though with more practical applications than even a verbose and sometimes bored Texan can describe.

So in the middle of repairing hail damage – while preparing for the next round of storms – it's a prayer I'll lift up for all those affected. There's the temptation to 'do something' involved with any crisis like this. I know that would be my first reaction if my roof was torn up. Still, the better course is to receive comfort by knowing that things like this happen at times and that, when they do, there is the opportunity to be silent and then speak as we're empowered. For that, every moment is the right time.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 15 June 2012

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1, 8.

To finish out a week, there is this last set of contrasts. These, perhaps, are the most important because they cut to the heart of what drives all the others. To refresh your memory, verses one through eight say:

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

Would somebody please tell me how any of those things, especially the last two, are possible without love or hate? Stop me if I'm wrong but I believe the purpose of all eight verses is to point to how it is love, not hate, that makes all things possible. Indeed, that's the point of all Scripture; indeed, that's the point of all things in life. No, this isn't some Pollyanna platitude, and no it isn't managing your life through clichés. It's the truth. In the long run, love always wins out. Good always triumphs, right always bests wrong, smiles are always better than frowns, and love always conquers hate.

The longer I live, the more I also see that anything that isn't peace is war. If you chunk down sin to its most base level it is war against God. That means it's war against God's love and His peace. In even the simplest ways, we pit ourselves against Him, opposing His purity with our impurity of choice. We put ourselves in His place, saying "no" like a two year old. Or we say "I know better" or "yeah, but." No matter how you slice it, whether it's simple defiance or capital murder, all sin is nothing fancier than making war against God.

Hence the final contrasts, telling us how there are times for love and hate, and times for war and peace. When everything else in life is at an end, I sometimes wonder if the dying don't contemplate that basic comparison at the very end. Did I live a life of love or a life of hate? Was I the kind of person who made love of life or was I the kind who made war on life? I think that because, when we're left with nothing else but our moments just before eternity, those are the only things that matter. If eternity matters most – and it does – then the thing that matters most here is love.

Here's the beauty of that and the clock: every moment is a moment for loving. Every time is perfect for it. Love is what drives forgiveness and forgiveness is always in vogue. It should always be at the ready. Love drives smiles and hugs and we can never have enough of those. Love drives friendships, good times, romance, and the lifelong path of a marriage. Love nailed Jesus to the cross and love brought him back three days later. Every time is the right time for love because God is love and every time is right for Him in our lives.

We can't say that about the other things in these 8 verses, not even war or peace. Sometimes in this world there are things worth fighting for, and if that means making war then when we're righteous in doing so, there is a time for making war. Do you think it is possible to make war and still wage it in love? I do. A few days ago I mentioned how it will be through war that all things here are cleansed to usher back harmony into God's creation. That will happen in love, from love, to render the land holy again so that God can freely walk among us, so that we can share freely with Him.

All that will happen because it is real love that fuels this world. What drives all those other comparisons and what drives everything that you or I think, say, or do is love. It was for love that we were put onto this planet. It was in love that we were redeemed. It is for love that we are called to live in love with each other. And it is through love that we transition through the door of death into the presence of He who is pure love.

Contrast love with anything else and anything else seems tarnished and lacking.

That's the purpose of these eight verses, I think. It's to show that there is a time and place for everything we do here, but that the time and place for the love-fuel behind them is always right now. When we lose loved ones, it is more love that carries us through. When a love moves on to another, it is the remembrance and hope of new love that fuels us to overcome the tough times. When we spend time with our kids, our parents, our loved ones and friends, it is that giving, sacrificing, active love that always keeps us sharing and coming back for more. It is love that keeps a man and woman together for fifty years, and it is true love that awaits me at the conclusion of this life when I yet again get to see my God in person. There are times and places for everything else in this world, but only love is appropriate in all of them.

Remember that, know that you're loved. Go and make today the time and place for love and peace in your life. Have a great Friday!

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 June 2012

What does the worker gain from his toil? Ecclesiastes 3, verse 9.

I think this verse may infer more than it actually says.

If you look at my Facebook page, you'll find a great many debates and arguments for and against the participation of unions in modern American industry. This column isn't the right place for me to spout off what I do or don't think of unions, and let's get this on the table too: this verse isn't one that you should take to mean that you should go to Wal Mart and organize all the workers there.

It's a simple question.

After two chapters of positing how meaningless things are without God, and after eight verses in a new chapter where King Solomon acknowledges (the obvious) that there are times and places for everything under the sun, he then asks the question. It comes out of the blue but knocks you back on your heels with its power and effective gut-twisting reality check. Pretty deep if you ask me. I need some help.

I found online in Clarke's Commentary on the Bible (<http://biblecommenter.com/ecclesiastes/3-9.htm>) that it says "What real good, what solid pleasure, is derived from all the labors of man? Necessity drives him to the principal part of his cares and toils; he labors that he may eat and drink; and he eats and drinks that he may be preserved alive, and kept from sickness and pain. Love of money, the basest of all passions, and restless ambition, drive men to many labors and expedients, which perplex and often destroy them. He, then, who lives without God, travails in pain all his days."

Ditto. What does it mean to you?

Maybe it really is a justification for unions after all. I mean, the purpose of a union is supposed to be organizing downtrodden workers into a common force that can deal with uncommonly unfair; at least that's what they're supposed to do. Maybe this verse is where every principled organizer ideally starts? I would hope so, at least. Or maybe it isn't. We report, you decide.

Maybe it's a statement, again, that there are bigger things than us. My job is made up of many details but they add up to me fitting into a picture that's much bigger than just me. In reality, my role is important but somewhat insignificant. That's true of almost every job I've ever had. In fact, one of my mentors once observed that "the unit could get along just fine without you or me." Amen. It was true of our Air Force unit, it's true of my job now, and it's true of yours too (even if you think you are all that and a bag of Fritos). The wheel is made of the cogs and the cogs aren't as big as the wheel. Sure, if you were gone for awhile the workplace would struggle a bit, but they'd find their footing. The show must go on. God forbid it would ever happen again but if we woke up and the president was gone, somebody new would be sworn in and the office would endure because the office and institution is bigger than one man and more important than the little people who've held it.

Maybe the verse is an expression of futility. After all, what DO you really gain from a day's work? A few dozen or a few hundred dollars? HA! They wouldn't meet our Federal government's financial need for even a second! Do you gain your possessions? If you're paying on a mortgage, after many years you do but it isn't yours just yet no matter how hard you work. Do you gain some satisfaction? I hope so, and that's always a good thing because we all need more love in our lives. Let's face it, though: sometimes that just isn't enough, and you can't pay that mortgage or pay off that Federal debt with smiles. Maybe it really is an expression of futility.

Or maybe I'm just over-thinking the verse and it really is just asking a simple question. Read it again: What does the worker gain from his toil? What good is all the worry, stress, strain, late nights and early mornings, and all the fuss & bother over what we do here? If this is as good as it gets, what the hell good is it?

It isn't good for hell at all, actually. I don't know what hell will be like other than terrible. Quite honestly, I think even slavery would be better than hell because at least a slave has work to do. At least slaves have purpose. In hell, I imagine there is no purpose other than suffering. I do know that I usually enjoy my work here, and that since we are creatures made for work in the Lord, that work can be a good thing, a real blessing. In previous Proverbials I've quoted my friend Patrick's Bible study where he talked about how we might just be able to expect to be doing good work in heaven. When I work knowing that my vocation is a blessing, the good that comes from it can be measured in the output, in the interactions, and in building goodwill for others to serve better. In heaven, I hope I'm a farmer. Or maybe a fisherman. Or maybe I'll get to be a greeter, or one of the guys who fixes rides at Disneyland. Any of those would be fun. Whatever I do, I know I'll get to do it with Him right by my side, working with me. THAT would make my toil into pleasure and my work into worship. And knowing that, maybe that's some good that comes from it after all.

I'll argue for that over a union break or a fat salary any day.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 19 June 2012

I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 10-12.

Last week, I was killing time (when I should have been working) and I came across a picture on Wikipedia that shocked me. Go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemuel_Cook and you'll see the picture. It's of a man named Lemuel Cook. He was ordinary in every way possible save one: Mr. Cook was the last remaining undisputed veteran of the Revolutionary War. He served with George Washington in the last years of the war and was with him at Yorktown when Cornwallis surrendered. His discharge papers were signed by General Washington himself and he remembered and knew the Father of our Country. Mr. Cook lived until the age of 106 and he died in 1866. Now, there's really nothing very shocking about this until I took a close look at the picture and realized I was staring into the eyes of a man who actually fought in the American Revolution. It wasn't a painting of him, something done to represent him: this was a real picture of a real person. He really existed as more than just a story and there is photographic evidence to prove it. The man has been dead now for nearly 150 years, but before he passed away, he sat for a photographer who recorded his existence on this third rock from the Sun. When you look at a picture, you're looking at a real person as they were during the capture of a moment in time. All in all, it's kind of amazing, don't you think?

Knowing that, I then consider how this verse pegs me dead on. I can't fathom eternity. I just can't. I was sitting at my computer, wasting time that wasn't wasted at all because it set the stage (at least for me) to absorb these verses today. A photograph of a man now gone for more years than he lived isn't anything remarkable. There are hundreds of photographs of you and me, and maybe in 150 years somebody will look at them and think something remarkable about us. 150 years is a long time, though, and Mr. Cook had lived 106 years before that. In looking at the picture I was looking at a man whose life spanned the time when he was a British subject to the time when he had lived past the end of the Civil War. That's a very long time, and it's been nearly 150 years since then! 150 years, however, is nothing compared to eternity.

Think about a verse in "Amazing Grace:" "when we've been there 10,000 years...we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun." Wrap your noggin around that thought and noodle it for awhile. Albert Einstein deciphered formulas that explain the atomic structure of matter and ways that let us understand the vast expanse that is outer space. Scientists study photographs from the Hubble Telescope that peek back at stars, galaxies, and the outer reaches of the universe. They're really looking at gleams of light that traveled thousands of years across unchartable distances just to reach the point where we can see them. And metaphysicists (and stoners) comprehend the vast reaches of what could exist outside our single dimensions of time, distance, and relativity.

In my opinion, none of those things understands the meaning of eternity quite as beautifully or perfectly as Mr. Wilburforce's hymn. Or today's verse.

In all my wildest dreams I don't think I've ever pondered eternity and all that God has done in a way that I could even begin to understand it. We can understand how matter is comprised, and we can predict the movement of bodies in the cosmos, but we can't explain how those things came to be. Sure, scientists try to explain our origins with a big bang (which sounds kind of cool but preposterous, I think) but none of us can explain what came before it. All our human explanations of the world – from our origins to how our behavior affects this planet – can be explained with science that is well thought through and meticulously researched...and it only breeds more questions (or conflicting science).

Perhaps this is part of the burden that the verse is talking about. I mean, just when you think you have learned everything there is about a subject, what happens when you learn something you didn't expect? Isn't your initial knowledge challenged? Maybe it means just a little bit more. Who, then, can say they know all there is to know about God and what He has done here? Who's to say that 'here' is all there is? Who is to say that we

could even comprehend the answer if ever it were revealed to us? Maybe that's part of the beauty of heaven, being able to see God face to face, without the hazy filters of our sins, and in a place out of time where He opens our minds to dazzle us with the knowing brilliance of His love.

What's more, it will last forever. Noodle that one too and when you're done, come back here and see if you aren't satisfied by the verse that says we have difficulty fathoming all that God has done. Then, be comforted again by Psalm 46:10: "be still and know that I am God."

I could ponder that all my life and it would still be little more than a great but small beginning. Me, I'm looking forward to more.

My dad was a history major and he instilled a love of history into my sister and I. He died before the internet had really become a daily, useful tool. When I was looking at the picture of that Revolutionary War veteran, I thought of my dad because I think he would have been fascinated with learning about people like Mr. Cook. History is so accessible online: just type a few words into Google and more facts than you ever knew existed are at your disposal. Dad would have enjoyed that, yet since this past Sunday was Father's Day, I also realize that he's enjoying something much better right now. Dad has been gone for 15 years. He's in eternity, where time and history are one. Perhaps he's already met the soldier Cook, or maybe even General Washington. Certainly he's already met the Almighty they served in their noble actions here on Terra Firma. I may not be able to grasp what eternity really means, but once I get there to join the others, I suspect that won't really matter when we're standing at the throne of the Father.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 20 June 2012

I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 12 and 13.

Repeat after me: God is good. Say that again and again. Maybe you could even make it a mantra; long as you say it with meaning, there is zero harm in that and nothing but good can come of it.

Say it over and over because 1. it's true and, 2. this is the book of Ecclesiastes, whose theme is that all things worldly are meaningless without God. Keep saying that phrase because you know that sometime, just up the road, there will be more verses talking about how awful the human condition is sans Deo.

For now, the phrase will be good enough because God is good enough. He is always enough. Indeed, He's really much more than enough and more abundant than we can imagine possible. He's so good that he provides millions of daily miracles that happen all around us just so we can get through what is called "today." If you don't believe that, just try to imagine how things would be if the Sun didn't rise. Life as we know it would immediately cease. Or think about a day without birds. It wouldn't take long for the bugs to get unmanageable, even for the best equipped Orkin man. Or think about a day without greenery all around you. Um, we exhale tons of carbon dioxide (which the US Government calls 'a pollutant;' go figure) that all these green plants just happen to use as food. What they exude is oxygen, which you and I need more than cold beer or country music. Sunlight, stars, safety on the road, clean clothes, water, food, friendships, smiles, internet news, comfortable shoes, jokes and humor, iPhones and iPods, electricity, fresh meat, and whole TV channels that refuse to show anything starring Roseanne Barr: like I said, millions of little miracles that help sustain us and get us through each day. How many did you take for granted yesterday? If you're like me, a ream of paper wouldn't be enough to list them all.

So for now, let's not focus on that and focus instead on the greatest miracle of all: forgiveness. God forgave you and me all those times when we've taken for granted all the small and big miracles He gives us. He forgave us of so much more than that, too. Think up the worst thing you could ever do – or have ever done – and then consider the Son smiling at you and holding out His arms to say "none of that matters anymore." Forgiveness. Check it out and get in touch with it because it's an amazing miracle and gift to be given. Even better, it's amazing to get to share it! That whole 'doing good' this verse mentions is a wonderful thing. It spreads good will, it breeds smiles, it is what good people want to do for each other. You know that starts with forgiveness.

And it's so amazing because it is the gift at the center of this verse. It's like Christmas in June (which, if you're interested, is an outreach run by my church...check out <http://www.watersedgefrisco.com>). If God were Allah, he would be vengeful, waiting to stomp on miserable little you or me for all the times we've fallen short of his divine strength. If God were the US Government, he would mess things up even with the best of intentions. If God were anything other than what He is (which is pure love, pure justice, pure knowledge, and pure holy life) he wouldn't be God. How does He show He loves us? He sent the part of Himself who is His Son to die so that we could be forgiven of all the times we've messed things up. Us, not Him: we've made the mistakes, yet He reached across eternity and met us where we are.

Admit it, too: you've messed up a few times. I know I have, more than these words have ever told, and more than I'm even likely to tell this side of the River Jordan. I'm trying to do better, but it doesn't always turn out that way. Thank Him that He's standing there with those open arms, ya know? Thank Him that He says "I forgive you" and then sends me back into the world to try again. Even better, He sends me here to take some time to enjoy His creation, those millions of subtle miracles and then some. I GET TO come back here to eat, drink and derive enjoyment from what I do! And even better than that, I get to do these things learning to be better by letting Him lead and teach me. According to these verses, this is the best the world has to offer, and God wants you and me to have the best and THEN some.

How cool is that?

Today is a fresh, new day. It's the first day of summer. Today isn't yesterday which was full of all those things you didn't do right as well as the successes you did. And it isn't tomorrow, which is still an unwritten page. Today is here and now, and this verse is recognizing that, as a gift from Him, you and I get to enjoy it, make the most of it, share a little bit of Him in it. When we do so, we're actually worshipping; have you ever considered that? Before all the bad things that could happen, there are the oh-so-many good things that have. And good things could happen too. They will, in fact, if you first seek God and ask Him to lead the way. There's no time like the present, and a new day awaits us. How about we start it out right?

And a good way to start is by saying it again: God is good. God is very good indeed.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 21 June 2012

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him. Ecclesiastes 3, verse 14.

We're pretty vain if we honestly think we're all that and a bag of Fritos. Sure, I'm all for applauding human accomplishment. The tallest building in the world, Mount Rushmore (and the Crazy Horse mountain nearby), the Declaration of Independence, the battle of Bannockburn, everything said by Winston Churchill, and Asian airports built on land that used to be part of the ocean: they're all significant achievements of humanity. They're monuments to what we can do, in many cases what's best in our nature. So are feeding the entire continent of Europe after World War II, putting men into outer space, every city in the ancient Mayan culture, and the US Interstate Highway system (which, by the way, is the single largest construction project in all of human history...you can look that up).

We the people can and should do some pretty amazing things. When I was a kid, a portable computer like my iPhone was science fiction, very Captain Kirk. Now they're very affordable. Have you ever watched a 747 take off? It constantly amazes me that something so massive and heavy can actually take to the air by manipulating some very basic principles of wind, thrust and velocity. And have you ever heard of the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yellow River in China? MASSIVE construction effort to harness the power of the river and electrify much of rural eastern China which, even in this so-called modern century, still lives like it is 1012 instead of 2012. When we harness the human spirit to what is within our control, we can push the limits of our abilities and do extraordinary things.

Yet I'm reminded of the corny joke where scientists challenge God to a man-making contest. "We can make a man just like you can," say the scientists. God accepts their challenge and, when the scientists begin by scooping up a handful of dirt, God says, "No, first you make your own dirt."

All those wonderful projects and massive accomplishments are really little more than rearranging somebody else's real estate. We do what we do because of what God did before us. Build a city, plant a thousand-acre farm, re-channel rivers and harness atomic power: human kind has been there, done that. They are significant accomplishments from human knowledge, human talent, and human drive. So, too, are forgiving your friends when they say terrible things about you, overlooking wrongs done to you, or saying "I'm sorry" when you've done something wrong. In the long run, history books will talk about the famous acts but I believe the daily "I'm sorry's" will mean more.

And all of those are still simply using the gifts God gives us. We are simply re-allocating the earth He created, the talents He bestowed, and the love that He first shared. That last part is the reason why, you know. It was out of love that He has done all He has done. It was in love that He continually makes things new. It is for His glory – that He may have it and we may share in it – that we are witnesses to these things.

No, you don't have to wear robes, preach like Billy Graham, or even memorize much about Scripture to testify to how magnificent is the creation in which we live; I don't. I'm as far from being 'holy' as a man can get. I don't know how to be better on my own, but through God I can be. Sharing that love as He would ought to be the first, best method. Love, forgive, understand, improve and, most of all, give thankful worship are all it takes. What of those things costs very much? And what of them is bad or harmful to us? I think you know the answer.

Here in June of 2012 I live in Texas but semi-regularly commute to my birthplace in Minnesota where I work. I do my part working with people to make complex issues understandable, and to keep peoples' healthcare claims moving forward. It can be mundane work, but so many extraordinary things have happened to make it possible. God worked many small miracles through thousands of people living their lives as they do, and those things laid the ground work for me to be where I am, do what I do. What I do where I am is part of that cycle, and it is all for the greater glory of Him who stands with me, so that others may benefit and He be raised up. Even when I don't quite 'get it,' He's still there guiding and helping.

Last month, I was enjoying a lunch at a park in downtown Minneapolis, beside the Mississippi River. There's a nice park near the Hennepin Avenue bridge, in front of the old flour mill district. In the river, there are locks and different man-made waterfalls that have tamed the once raging rapids into a more gentle flow. It took massive construction and great endeavor to re-channel the river and harness its power, but that's what happened (kind of like a small scale of what the Chinese have done). Today, you can sit there and enjoy a bag of White Castles and simply ponder just like I did. At the end of it, if you walk away feeling all puffed up at what a great and wonderful people we are, I'm thinking that you've missed the point. A better way might be to stop, think about this verse, and remember that before you or I saw the river, it was there. Before we moved the rocks to alter the flow, somebody made those rocks. And before any of that was there, there was God. Noodle that one and make it a great day by making it to a glory greater than our own.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 22 June 2012

*Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.
Ecclesiastes 3, verse 15.*

Think back to Ecclesiastes 1 where something similar was first said: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." For that verse, you and I discussed how, even in our technologically advanced world, we're simply re-hashing and improving on inventions from the past. You and I don't have all the conveniences we do because they magically appeared. People had to come up with an idea and make it. Usually that happens because they're building on another idea. It reminds me of an exchange between Governor Ronald Reagan and a bunch of college kids. In the late 60s, a group of young people challenged the fifty-something ex-actor, goading him that he was too old to understand their situation. "You grew up in a different world," said the leader of the college students. "Today we have television, jet planes, space travel, nuclear energy, computers." Not to be outsmarted, Reagan quickly fired back: "You're right. It's true that we didn't have those things when we were young. We invented them."

What's changed? None of the new inventions that make our lives easier today are really completely new. They're improvements on things already invented, or new twists on older technology. That's not to say that there is nothing new left to be invented. It's simply a fact of life. The digital music you listen to on an iPod is the same music you can listen to on your 33 RPMs (that is, if you still have a record player...which reminds me...). The digital player is different, but it's really nothing more than a faster, improved descendant from what was commonplace when I was a kid. Microwave ovens, plasma TVs, composite roof shingles, improved fabrics, next year's Audi: you get the picture.

But there's more.

We are all judged and judgment isn't wrong. Based on what we've done in our lives – what we've done and, in part, how we've improved on what we did in the past, how we believed based on what we learned – we'll be judged. God isn't blind and He knows what we've done in our lives. Is He keeping track of it, a big list? Maybe. Would I want to stand up and be judged against that list? Absolutely not! I couldn't bear standing in front of my maker with all my sins, my shame over them, and my abject guilt laid bare: all knowing that what He could and should do to me for them would be eternal agony. Thank God for His intercession with someone who took my punishment for me.

That intercession is at the crux of faith. Do you accept it or not? Talking about it today is nothing new. Even talking about it on the internet is nothing new. It was long ago done for you because God the Father does and will righteously judge you and me. Our situation is sort of like trying to help an addict. We love them and they love us, yet they still reject when we try to help. We want to help because we love them and because we ought to try to help people we love when they're in a bind. Yet the substance to which they're addicted puts up a barrier, making them suspicious, luring them back even when they've gotten clean. We can't tolerate the behavior because it's harmful, illegal, and any number of reasons. They can't help themselves but they know deep inside that something isn't right.

That's how it is with our sins. You and I are addicted to them and it can be so difficult to kick the habit. Despite that, a just God can't tolerate anything unholy and whether we like it or not, the crap we do is unholy. That's not unlike you or me taking that tough love stance with a loved one caught up in drugs. We love them but we can't tolerate it because it's unholy destructive. We judge their behavior to be wrong, and we uphold the standard.

And if tough love is loved toughly, usually mercy is involved. Mercy doesn't mean compromising on the standard: it means upholding it while going beyond it. Mercy is understanding and love; mercy is supporting them, doing what we can for them to kick the habit. Mercy is rehab. Have you ever considered that faith is rehab? Faith helps us kick the habit of our sins while establishing in us the groundwork for future success. It's

the gift from God, the way He imparts his intervention in our lives that was what He did on Calvary. He does the work in us, remakes us through our believing He will do so.

And there's nothing new about that. It's how He's reached out to us since that long ago day in the Garden when a couple of half-naked people discovered they had gotten what they asked for. It's how faith has worked for millions of people all through history. As long as there is a rock in the sky called "Earth," it's how things will remain until the time when God returns in person to finally reset things back to that holy relationship those two half-naked people knew before it all got mucked up.

You and I may not have invented many of the marvels in our modern world...or maybe you did. Me, I know I'm not an inventor. I simply observe, catalogue and comment. In truth, there's nothing new about that either, and I find some comfort in knowing that people before me have handled similar situations. They did it because God helped them. With that same measure, so can you or me.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 26 June 2012

And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there. I thought in my heart, “God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.” Ecclesiastes 3, verses 16 and 17.

Hell on earth can teach us. These two verses center around one of the questions in life that constantly vexes me: why do bad things happen? Does God cause those things to happen in our life? If we don't learn by the softness of love then perhaps we learn through a whack on the head.

I Just read an excellent book by a man named Andrew Palau: “The Secret Life of a Fool.” In it the author catalogues his 30 year journey in pride, arrogance and partying down in what sounded like a really fun life. When he reached the point of discussing his repentance before God and finally accepting how God had been constantly working on him, he realized it was himself that had been standing between him and God's real happiness. By making the man face his own guilt and shame over all the booze, drugs, lies, affairs, and everything else he had done, God showed him how the guilt over those things was taken away and all that was left was amazing grace.

I was in tears reading it. That could be me. It could be me because I too have let my pride and myself keep God's amazing love at a distance. Invariably, when that has happened, disaster has ensued. Whenever I have lost focus and turned it onto myself, things generally haven't gone well; whenever I have thought myself too big for my britches, God always seemed to knock me down a notch or two. At least that's the way it seemed.

But the way it seemed may or may not be deceiving. Perhaps He took an active role in causing calamity to come my way, or perhaps He simply stood aside and let the natural result of my sins take over. You could say that standing aside is an active thing. It isn't simply parsing words or torturing the King's English to make it mean what you want it to mean. When God promises punishment for our wrongs, I believe more and more He's saying “this is what happens when you mess up. I'm going to let this happen to you. It isn't what I want, but it's the consequences of your choices.” God made a call for my own good so that I might learn to come back and rely on Him.

To do that, He's brought judgment. He has judged our actions and allowed the consequences of the bad choices to find their way to us. He isn't hammering us constantly, but He is allowing the bad stuff to occur. For the reason why, see the last paragraph. If you don't think that happens, please think about living with teenagers, or any kids in general. You teach them, model good behavior, set expectations. Do they meet those expectations? Usually, yes, but sometimes no (which usually starts with the world 'no') and that's when the tough work really starts. It's hard to enforce discipline, but you do it because the root of 'discipline' is 'disciple.' Sometimes that means allowing hurt to enter their lives. Spankings hurt, break-ups hurt, it hurts to have your pride checked.

It tells me a couple of things. One, God is active in our lives. He isn't disinterested. He's constantly monitoring us, engaging in our lives, nurturing and nudging us along, but also letting the bad things happen in hope that we will see the error of our ways and change. Two, God knows right from wrong. As pure 'rightness,' and pure holiness, He sees what is not right (and is therefore wrong) but He allows us the freedom to experience that for ourselves. To think that I know better is little more than idolatry, thinking I'm God enough to go my own way.

Biblical prophecy talks about a time to come when true wickedness will reside in Zion and will insert itself in the place of God. At that time, real wickedness like humanity has never known will demand to be worshipped as God. I will reserve comment on prophecy, whether or not it's been fulfilled or is still down the road. Instead, I mention this to make the point that, whether it's already done or waiting to be done, you and I do this each and every day. We place our wickedness before the real love that God teaches us. If you don't believe me, ask

yourself what you thought the last time you drove by that person on the road who held the sign that said "homeless. Please help." Did you stop and give them a 20, or drive them to a job center? Did you even stop to talk at all? Pray to yourself? I know what I didn't do. Like I said, wickedness.

Or how about that ongoing feud with the in-laws who look down on you for things you've done? Do you look down on them as well? Or judging the people who wear their sagging pants at the mall. Or thinking ourselves above others because we've done things they haven't? Holding grudges, not letting go of past guilt, constant worry, letting ourselves be tempted by the same old vulnerabilities, cussing like a sailor? How many of my sins or your sins do we need to catalogue here before we see that it is we, not God, who perpetuate the wickedness of the world despite all the times when God tries to turn things another way.

Perhaps those things can serve as reminders that we need God's help, need that redemption only He can offer. Instead of holding on to the dysfunction, perhaps it would be better to let go of it, let somebody else take care of it all. If hell on earth can teach us a good lesson, perhaps the first, best lesson is to avoid that hell in the first place.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 27 June 2012

I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 3, verses 18 and 19.

When I was in school, I'll admit I was confused. I went to middle school in the late 1970s in Oklahoma and later in Iowa. In both places, the teaching in science was muddled. By the secular book, teachers said that men were descended from apes. There wasn't any problem in discussing the creationist belief, either, that this simply wasn't true. Today it's more difficult in most schools to discuss creation versus evolution, such is the dogmatic nature of a threatened secular curriculum. I know what I believe, and I believe what I know to be true based on both what I have learned in faith and what I learned in school.

So then I read verses like these that seem to give credence to the idea that people actually are descended from animals. We both die; we both draw air for life. We both require food; we both burn energy in similar ways; we are both sexual creatures; we both feel and have cognitive abilities. We live in a world where we are interdependent on other species for survival. It's all very 'Lion King' with talk of the circle of life.

The difference is all about 'like,' you see.

We are like the animals. Our fate is like that of the animals. The verse doesn't say 'we are animals:' that word 'like' is used instead. Sure, this isn't the irrefutable proof that creation wins out over evolution, especially since the two mindsets are mutually exclusive. What it simply is is a reminder that we too live and die.

It reminds me of another confusing thing: death itself. I used to date a girl who was obsessed with death. We were just teenagers and she was far deeper than I was. In fact, even at her young age it was all too evident that she was incredibly bright and supremely intellectual. She was also obsessed with death. Her life was as far from mine as left could be from right. Where I had always lived in nuclear family middle class security, her life had been one of abuse, divorce, foster parenting, struggle and poverty. She had little faith in God and even less in people. I spent much of our relationship trying to convince her that things would get better for her, and in time they did even as she continued to cling to her negative obsession. "I would be better off insane or dead," she would often say. Eventually, it grew to frustrate a very immature me.

I don't understand that fascination. The thing is that I have faced death myself, both as a consequence of living and as a choice. I have known the desperation that comes with despondency and have rationalized that things would have been better if I weren't around. Being on the other side of that irrational rationalization, all I can say is "thanks be to God for mercy." The verses are true that we are like the animals in that we will die. We will expire and our bodies return to the earth before God one day reunites them with spirit in an age yet to come. But the animals have spirits, and the animals can feel too yet the animals aren't made in the image of God. They aren't made to be in communion with Him as we were. When was the last time you baptized your dog? Or brought a gecko to communion? Has your parrot ever read Scripture (or even these words) to you? See what I mean?

Here, however, is the blessing and the challenge out of it all: most of the world doesn't believe like that. If you live faith as an exercise of "thank God I don't believe like THEY do," you're a Pharisee and a fool. There's danger in taking that posture of thinking that you've got something others don't. Our tendency is entrench and build walls to keep what we have... walls that also keep others out. That isn't what God Himself did. As Jesus here, He went out to the people who didn't believe in Him and got dirty with them. He didn't compromise Himself or His faith: He exemplified them. If you think about it, the WWJD question is sort of stupid. I mean, He's Jesus and you and I aren't. He tells us we can do things that he can by having simple faith yet we aren't Jesus. We aren't God Immanuel, God with us. In a way, we are like the animals.

I think back on what I could have done differently to reach out to my forlorn friend, to better model faith and real hope to her instead of just trite words. Knowing what I know now, maybe the best approach would have been to just love. Just listen, love, be real, be someone on her level but without her desperation. I tried these things, and I hope they worked. What would Jesus do? I think that's what He would have done. Life here is confusing and muddled and sometimes we get the science of it wrong. But there's nothing confusing about the simple decency of God's love. We were made to live in it. Even an animal knows that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 28 June 2012

All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" Ecclesiastes 3, verses 20 and 21.

The spirit of man and the spirit of animals: did King Solomon not understand that a person's soul is an immortal thing, or was he simply waxing philosophic?

I remember being part of a pastoral discussion over a decade ago when we were attending a church in west Colorado Springs (a church that, coincidentally, may now be evacuated or in danger of burning down). The pastor was discussing the idea of whether or not animals would be in heaven. He said he believed they would be for a number of reasons: they were in Eden, they were created for God's glory and our enjoyment, they were created as a way to provide for us, they had been subjected to creation's frustration but weren't the cause of it (sort of like being collateral damage when man fell). He also said that he hoped this was the case because he had grown up on a farm and liked animals.

I didn't grow up on a farm but I like animals too. In fact, while I was writing this (sitting in bed with my laptop in front of me) my cat, Sadie, was curled up beside me. She laid down after finishing her usual routine of jumping up on the bed, pawing me for attention, and meowing until I did as she wanted. During this time, her pal, Moo, (our other cat) was chasing a fly in the bedroom. Our two dogs were actually quiet in their kennels after a long day of being lazy, that is, excepting the time when the FedEx deliveryman showed up with a package. I love our animals. They have attitude, personality, and love.

It's a dangerous thing to presume to know the mind of God. You and I aren't God so we shouldn't make assumptions about what He does or doesn't feel. I'll make an assumption, instead, basing it on words from Genesis. God created all the creatures and he saw that it was good. He blessed the creatures of the ocean and the birds, and was pleased at His work and His new creations. He created the animals with feelings, the ability to sense, the ability to love. I think that, if God was pleased, it's a fair assumption to think that God must love the animals too.

They why did He have ancient people sacrifice animals as restitution for their sins? Again, don't presume to know God's thoughts. Simply take Him at His word, and His word said that the animals would be substitutes for all the terrible things people had done. They were to be stand-in's, reminders that the price paid for sin was paid in blood and death. When Christ fulfilled that price, His sacrifice of Himself made those animal sacrifices moot.

Yet none of this really touches on the point of whether or not animals have souls the way people do. People aren't animals, so would it be ecclesiastically wrong to then assume their souls aren't like ours? I don't think so. I believe animals have spirits; so, evidently, did Solomon because he mentioned it in this verse. And Solomon was the wisest man to have ever lived. He wouldn't have believed such a thing if he hadn't been inspired to do so.

So why the question?

Keep in mind that the verses previous to this one talked about how God wanted us to realize our mortality, that we can live and die in the same manner as the other living creatures around us. These verses are yet another pointer that all there is in this world is meaningless without Him who created it. I read Solomon's "who knows if" statement to be a rhetorical device, posing the question to point the reader to the answer that we need God.

You already know that I like my dogs (and cats, of course...we mustn't forget the cats). We have two, Josh, a Catahoula hound we got 5 years ago from somebody giving them away and the other (Bella) being a pit bull mix that actually belongs to my daughter but is living with us while she settles in a new apartment; personally, I'll be surprised if the dog ever moves out. They're fun, they're good watch dogs: even though they're both

cream puffs, I wouldn't want to test that loud angry bark if I were an intruder. I sometimes wonder how much better our world would be if we could love like dogs love. Yes, we can make all kinds of snarky remarks about how dogs have a 5-minute memory, how they're sometimes dumb as rocks, and how they get all crazy over the smallest things (like birds on the bird feeder or a car driving down the alley). All true, and yet when I scratch them behind the ears, or call them to give them attention, they willingly come and look up at me with those sweet eyes. If you scratch Josh behind the ears, he opens his mouth and it looks like he's smiling. And Bella loves to play fetch. I've never had a dog who could play fetch for hours and never tire of it. This dog has real attitude. Dogs love unconditionally, freely, and once you win their trust they almost always come back to you without hesitation even if you were terrible to them before. That tells me there's spirit there, and not just internal energy or lack of self control. I know what I believe about the souls of animals; when I die, I hope I find out it was correct.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 29 June 2012

So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? Ecclesiastes 3, verse 22.

Starting today, I'm taking some time off. In fact, I'm going to take most of next week off, so you won't be receiving these messages for a few days. The Clan and I are taking a few days of R&R at one of our favorite places: a resort where we've stayed several times before. We've been saving, planning, and anticipating this trip for months now. I made the reservations late last year, back when the idea of even making it to Independence Day seemed far off. Now, as I'm writing this, the bags are packed, the breakfast burritos (our traditional vacation morning meal) are made, coffee is on a timer, and I'm sharing a few minutes before sleep with you in God's word.

Indeed, all this is possible because of Him and because He made it possible for us to work. Most days I enjoy my job, something I haven't always been able to say. Had you read this verse to me three years ago I might have mocked you for it. At that time, I was switching companies and feeling professionally and personally adrift. I had finished a very successful project, and it was one of the most rewarding times of my life. I wouldn't trade how I felt in those days...and I wouldn't want to ever go through those that followed again. Who can see what would happen after me? Heck, I couldn't see what would happen within the next twenty minutes. Many mistakes, a few triumphs, the love of good people, a patient wife and family, and three years later, I'm finally in a place where I feel secure and valued. I enjoy what I do even though I work in an industry that now promises to undergo radical change thanks to the wiles of the US government. Still, I'm blessed to do what I do and be thankful for where I am. I don't know what will happen tomorrow – nobody does – but I do believe my best days are still ahead.

If you ask my wife whether or not she likes her job, I think she'd tell you "absolutely" but that she'd also agree she pays a high physical, emotional and even spiritual price for working where she does. Her workplace is chronically understaffed for a number of reasons, all of which usually end up on her desk. She's on her feet all day, keeping things running at a pre-school with nearly 200 students and a babied staff of forty. When she isn't on her feet, she's at her desk doing balance sheets, schedules, enrollment and administrative reports, and handling boo boo's and communications with pushy parents who expect much while giving little. This is actually her dream job, and I know she gets tremendous satisfaction from it. Still, if you asked her some days, especially those of late, "do you want to quit," she might have to think over the answer.

Sometimes I envy her, envying that she has so much to do. My work is feast or famine. I crave having many things to do. The devil's work comes from idle hands after all; I know this too well. You know, I really need this vacation after all!

Please understand, I'm not whining or bragging. I genuinely feel for those who are out of work, or those who are unable to take a trip like we are. Been there, done that, hope to not do it again but even I understand that times change and times are now hard. My career has changed course several times in the last 30 years and it could always change again. Knowing that, I'll give thanks and dive in to enjoying what time off I'm taking. We've had several short weekend getaways but in reality this is the first family vacation we've had since 2008. If you think of me tomorrow, please think of me sitting in a lounge by the pool.

During that time off, I think I'll noodle this verse. Here on the third rock from the sun there is nothing better than to work. If that's all you want to live for, then go ahead and live to work. Don't bother working to live and don't bother taking time to stop and smell the proverbial roses. You and I usually don't. But is that what you really want? If it is, don't be surprised when you get to retirement asking yourself "is that it?" Shouldn't our work be fulfilling as well as a fiduciary reward?

Maybe there is a better way. Maybe that better way is to find the work you enjoy and work hard at it as an act of service, of worship, of devotion. It's a bit like the adage of "if you work at what you love you'll never work a

day in your life." I believe that, if you work with what you love, you can do so being thankful, making the most of your talents, and doing so as a serving witness of how you're blessed. When you do that – when WE do that – we aren't just working: we're using our vocation as a way to give thanks to Him who blessed us with it. What's more, I believe that's what the verse is saying even as it doesn't say it in such words.

That's even better than a few days away poolside in Arizona. I'll think about that, too, while I'm away. Have a great weekend and better days ahead my friend.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 9 July 2012.

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors — and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. Ecclesiastes 4, verses 1-3.

“Oppression” is a pretty strong word to start off this chapter, don’t you think? I mean, it isn’t one of those words that we can sugar-coat and make sound better. It’s ugly and intimidating. My Webster’s says that to oppress is to “treat with unjust harshness, especially to rule over tyrannically; to cause to feel mentally or spiritually burdened or physically as though suffocating.” Usually, when I think of oppression I think of how Communist countries rule their workers’ paradise: they have to crush individuality and freedom of expression in order to keep people in line, and they do it through brutality. Or I think of bullies who use intimidation and force to overcome their fickle insecurities. And I associate oppression with a darkly metastasizing government grown too large that forcefully takes from one person to transfer to another in stark violation of its founding principles.

In church yesterday, we talked a lot about oppression and the pastor didn’t even intend to. The subject was ‘what fights for control of your heart, mind, soul and strength’ but I quickly came to the conclusion that a corollary subject was oppression. Pastor Mark talked about what fights to control us, using verses from Scripture and recent experiences he encountered on a mission trip to Alabama. Last week, he took a group of junior high students on a trip where they worked in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and with genuinely impoverished and hopeless people. He talked about how these kids got down and dirty with people whose lives they never knew existed, how it’s so easy to overlook all this genuine suffering when the suburbs where we live are affluent and cloistered. And he spoke about talking with people who struggled with drug use, pornography, addiction, drug sales and a host of other seedy problems...and these were problems talked about by the Christian kids he took on the trip, not just those whom they served.

I had read today’s verse a few hours before and came away from the service thinking that oppression of the spirit is the worst kind of all. That the government can use its force to compel us to do things, act in certain ways is oppressive but it is the crushing of peoples’ spirits that makes this possible. A bully can’t intimidate and succeed without people’s will being subjugated along the way. The Soviets (and all their satellite cancers) didn’t stay in power by letting people freely decide what to do: they oppressed the peoples’ spirit and crushed it.

What keeps somebody homeless? Is it economic circumstance, a history of choices, addiction or health reasons? Those are certainly factors but the underlying cause is defeat of the human spirit. The worst thing that can happen to a person is to have their spirit destroyed. Do that and you can do anything to them. Crush somebody’s spirit and nothing you do to them will matter quite as much. King Solomon understood this when he wrote the verses above. He saw that it is evil to oppress, to control, to crush the will and the spirit of someone who believes. Once the spirit is oppressed, it can be controlled; once the spirit is crushed, no worldly action or natural occurrence can rebuild it.

How do you re-instill that spirit? It starts with a walk to the Cross. Plain and simple, there can’t be any real, long-lasting, truly redemptive healing that could bear fruit as improved circumstance, choice or anything else without healing at the Cross. I don’t make this stuff up: that’s just the way it is. All through Ecclesiastes, a thousand years before his descendant Savior trod the earth, King Solomon knew this as well. He could understand how misuse of his governing power could destroy the people of his kingdom. What’s more, he could see that there is no comfort on earth for the oppressed when the soul is overwhelmed and the human spirit defeated.

He could see that the only remedy for this was found in God. Natural healing of a natural spirit requires supernatural love from a supernatural living God. Despite our so-called modern world, nothing has changed. The internet won’t solve your problems. Money won’t make them better. Zumba, the next Food Network Star,

silly hope and change mantras, and all the worker-confiscated tea in China won't make things better. Self-help gimmicks are useful but they aren't the real solution. When I'm down and feeling oppressed, I try to organize my schedule into smaller activities that I can complete and 'win.' I break down my large tasks into sub-tasks and congratulate myself when I complete them. There's nothing wrong with that...unless you let yourself think yourself think that's it, that's all it takes. Without involving the supernatural in my natural life, those sub-tasks are meaningless. Isn't that the point of Ecclesiastes? I can do all the 'right things,' but until I take my broken spirit to God, it will remain broken, like a new house built on a cracked and crumbling foundation. Eventually, there would be trouble again.

The natural yearning and natural place of the human spirit to live free in God's love, not to be subjugated by oppressors. There really are people in this world who thrive on controlling others. There really are people who use their position and advantage to put down the people around them. There really are bullies on the playground, bullies in the boardroom, bullies online, and bullies in your government. All these kinds of people gain their power and their strength by oppressing others, by trying to crush somebody's spirit. Solomon knew the cure for that. Do you or I?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 10 July 2012

And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 4, verse 4.

You and I, we depend on each other. I like to write and feel very privileged to write these commentaries. It is something I get to do, not something I have to do, and I believe that when the words are written well, it is not me writing them but a gift from God. The words, however, mean nothing unless somebody reads them. That's where you come in. If you enjoy them, if you learn something, if you are moved or taught or encouraged or built up, then I also believe that it was God at work in you through the words. I take no credit for them: it's all God. I simply get to be the scribe and that's more than satisfying for me.

Thus, I hope you can see that, without you, what I do means nothing. If I haven't said it in awhile, thanks for letting this be part of your life. I value our relationship.

What I don't do is envy you. Some who read these are better off than I am; some are worse off. I'm thankful for your friendship as a reader and a friend, but I don't envy you. I hope you can say the same thing because our relationship is, in part, based on caring and love, not on envy. When I work hard on these messages, I do so hoping they speak to you and touch your heart somehow.

Envy results when you let yourself feel antagonism because somebody has, is, or does something that you don't have or aren't. So I don't envy you and I sincerely hope you don't envy me. There's nothing about me that's envious. If you've done well with your time and talents, I'm happy for you. If you are in trouble, I'll be glad to do what I can to help. If you're lonely, contact me because I'll listen. There are any number of 'if's' that I could list here but I choose to leave out the one that says "if you have something I want, then I envy you." I feel that way because I agree with the verse. Too much that is bad in the world has resulted from envy. Everything from adultery to addiction to this year's political class warfare rhetoric: there is nothing good that results from envying what our neighbor has. If you live your life always looking around for what you don't have, when your life is over all you'll have is a handful of ashes.

One of my friends is a pastor who preaches that some of the most insidiously evil places on earth are in the suburbs. The suburbs? Really? I mean, where I live is hardly Wisteria Lane. That's true, except that on my street alone I can identify people who have done and dealt drugs, people who have cheated on their spouses, thieves and vandals, a man with gambling problems, women who have had secret abortions, people who dishonestly abandon their leases and responsibilities, people who regularly and willingly break city and state and Federal laws, and people who gladly, openly and publicly flaunt both their promiscuous sexuality and their problematic alcoholism.

Can you name a few neighbors like that? I think I know your answer. Given that, perhaps my pastor friend isn't too far off the mark.

Perhaps the worst thing I notice about living in the 'burbs is that it's the home of keeping up with the Joneses. We do what our neighbors do so that our place looks better. We snicker and make snide comments about what our neighbors do, and we covet their cars, their belongings, their spouses, their clothes. Stop me if I'm wrong but isn't the foundation of all that little more than envy? How is any of it anything but sinful, even downright evil? I think I know the answer to that as well and here's the real kicker about it: I live in what one survey called 'the fastest growing city in America.' The second fastest growing place is the next town over, where my daughter lives. I live smack dab in the place where more people want to move than anywhere else right now. They envy those of us who live in my town. They want to live where I live. If only they knew what I knew...

...Then perhaps it would make no difference at all. People will want to live someplace for many more reasons that would outweigh any negatives I could list here. In reality, the town actually is a nice place to live. It's very convenient, people are friendly, taxes are low, the climate is good and our real estate market didn't tank like

the rest of the country during the last 3 years. Most important, the town is (largely) a climate ripe for believers. It's the southern latitude of the Bible Belt. It's easy to live here and believe as I do because there are many others who believe likewise.

Like I said, the suburbs. Yet don't forget, too, that this is the home of upscale envy. All that petty coveting is part of living here and that's the negative, sneaky-evil part. This is the place where status counts for much more than it ever should. This is the place where some of the uglier traits of human existence fester and perpetuate except that here they have a shiny veneer of new construction and false fronts. The worst part about it all: you don't have to live in the north Dallas suburbs to live in a pit of pathetic human envy.

After knowing all that, I can't blame you if you drop off reading these words and walk away. I mean, I may not envy you and you may not envy me but it's still something that plagues both of us. Through it, we also get to depend on each other for reading, for friendship and for more. By our relationships, we get to involve the Creator in our lives and through that He lives and moves among us. That's the cure for the common envy. The verse is right: everything that we do of this world springs from envy, from doing things to keep up with our neighbors. Without God, nothing good comes from that. With God, nothing becomes impossible.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 July 2012

The fool folds his hands and ruins himself. Ecclesiastes 4, verse 5.

What a nugget of brilliance this verse is! Eight tiny words speak a powerful mountain of truth, observation, advice, warning and comfort.

What usually happens to people who fold their arms together and pout? Or how about that guy who stands there with his hands in his pockets, deeply immersed in thought; what happens to him? What happens to the person who spends too much time navel gazing and not enough time 'doing'?

The overwhelming answer I'm looking for here is "nothing" because nothing usually happens to procrastinators, ponderers and people who sit on their thumbs. Initially, if you want nothing to happen to you, do nothing. In the short run, it works every time. Sure, in a crisis there can be immediate repercussions but not every decision is a crisis and, usually, most result in nothing substantial happening. In the long run, however, you and I both know this isn't the case. In the long run, people who do nothing when there is something to do or say bring ruin on themselves. Maybe it isn't the 'asteroid falling out of the sky on my house' kind of ruin, and maybe it isn't even the kind of thing that bears immediate fruit. But the verse is a true warning telling us that inactivity in the face of need is a sure-fire recipe for disaster.

So does this mean that we should butt our heads into other peoples' business? I mean, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to look around and see that people need all kinds of things that we can help with. Does this mean we should inject ourselves into every situation in which we can be of service? Answer: maybe or maybe not. Hold tight for a second before we talk about that.

Or does it mean that we know best? I mean, if someone tries something and fails and we know we could do better, does this mean we should tell them how to do it? Helicopter parents beware. Answer (again): maybe or maybe not. Please still keep holding on.

Finally, does this mean that we shouldn't take our time to consider things as they come our way? Does this verse condemn contemplating our options? Answer (and you know it): maybe or maybe not.

It's maybe or maybe not for all these things. The more I believe in the Almighty, the more I see that our choices are usually black and white, yes or no even when they're nuanced. Yet to get to determining that black and white choice, there are many gray fields to traverse. Maybe you should inject yourself into someone else's business and maybe you shouldn't. The situation presents all kinds of options, but what's the best one? Here's another gray, nuanced answer as to why that is: it depends. How many times in life have you been frustrated by those two words? I think every kid in America is frustrated by hearing "it depends" from their parents when they're looking for an up or down nod.

But, yes, maybe it depends. Specifically, it depends on where God is leading you in that decision. Should you butt in or stay out? Should you tell someone of a better way or should you let them find out on their own? Should you consider or shouldn't you?

It depends on where God is leading you in that decision. I'm simple enough to believe that the best thing to do is usually the thing that God is leading me to do. That can only be discerned by involving Him in the decision. And that involvement takes place through active prayer. Even a procrastinator can do that. In fact, perhaps that is the first, best thing that we should do when we're faced with choices? It isn't that tough. "What should I do, Lord?" "Where do you want me to go?" Clear your thoughts, speak calmly, pray, and then listen and watch. Will an answer immediately be revealed? You know the answer: maybe or maybe not. It depends (this time on what He has in store). But one will be revealed and it will always be for good even if it's tough.

Brilliant but simple concept, don't you think?

I like to 'do' things. Too much of my life has been spent in indecision and procrastination. All too often I've been that guy folding his hands and standing around, watching instead of acting. And all too often, nothing happened to me when something good could have. Because of my inaction, when things did happen, usually they weren't what I had desired. The time for that is past. Since letting God lead me, I find my decisions come better and with much less angst or worry. There's no need to worry when the Creator of all things is personally involved in how you live your life. He is whether we acknowledge it or not, and whether we believe it or not he really does know what He's doing. Why not find out now?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12 July 2012

Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 4, verse 6.

When I write these, my process is usually similar to this: I pray, then I go to biblegateway.com and copy the new verse into my Word template. I read through the verse several times and see if it lights a spark in my brain. Then, if it does, I sometimes do research in other Bible versions or commentaries. I might Google the verse as well to see what comes up. I also might review yesterday's Proverbial to look for patterns. Finally, I jot down some thoughts and start to write. Knowing that (and having done it), here are a few of the initial thoughts I had when writing today's.

Tranquility base, here. The Eagle has landed.

Synonyms for tranquility (from thesaurus.com): ataraxia, calm, calmness, composure, coolness, equanimity, imperturbability, order, peacefulness, placidity, repose, rest, serenity, stillness.

A spoon full of sugar makes the medicine go down (or was it helps the medicine go down. I can't remember).

A bird in hand is better than two in the bush.

Everything that Solomon says in this book seems to end with 'chasing after the wind.' Was he stoned?

Philippians 4: 11-13 (thanks to my Concordia).

As you can see, it's a rather eclectic grouping of thoughts. Some days it's organized and focused; some days are like today. And some days really do seem like chasing after the wind. This, however, isn't one of those days. If you think back to yesterday, the verse talked about how 'the fool folds his hands and ruins himself.' We talked about how, if you do nothing, nothing will happen to you. Here, today, is the contrast to that.

To have a handful of anything insinuates doing something. You can't gain anything in life by sitting around and pouting, pondering, pontificating or procrastinating. We were made for better. We were made to live tranquil lives.

With tranquility, you have peace. Your Eagle can indeed land safe and secure. Tranquility is a function of peace and calm. It's serene, calm, still; I won't use the words 'ataraxia' or 'imperturbability.' It's better to have something and be content with it, living in peace, than many things that cause you angst. I had a friend once who desired to live in peace yet all she seemed to do was surround herself with drama and take on more than she could handle. I don't know what happened to her, but I hope she got her handful of tranquility while setting aside those two handfuls of toil.

With tranquility you can accept hard choices or, as Mary Poppins said, that whole spoon full of sugar thing. So much of life is that toil and chasing after the wind thing. I have another friend who has become really good at keeping positive. When she gets down, she knuckles down into thanking God for everything she has, even the challenges and bad times, and it helps her accept those bad times and persevere through them. I think that's a function of feeling tranquility and peace, and the only real peace there is comes from Above. It becomes much easier to tackle tough situations in life if you can face them with a tranquil outlook.

My friend's thankfulness, too, is a bit of that bird in the hand thing. She's quick to realize that all things in life are blessings and all blessings come from God. Because of an outlook based in peace, it becomes easier for her to capitalize on opportunities and be thankful for things she has. I admire that. It's an ability to face the world knowing nothing of the world can defeat you. It's also a realistic admission that what she has is good and

should be tended, appreciated, and cared for. It's better to have a little and be happy with it than a lot and be sad about it; doesn't that say the same thing as this verse? I think my friend knows why.

It's also true that much of this book does end with the observation that most of our lives is a chasing after the wind. So much of our lives is sin. When I think of sin, I am learning more and more that it's not just the wrongs, lies and evil we do. Sin is anything that separates us from God. Anything that breaks our union, our constant emotional, spiritual and even physical communion with His peace, tranquility and earth-building love is sin. Adam and Eve didn't get kicked out of paradise just because they disobeyed. They got kicked out because they put their wants ahead of their relationship with God. They accepted that obstruction into their hearts and they let something come between Him and them. That separation was sin, and because we're thick with it so much of our lives is spent correcting the errors of our sins. So much of our time is spent trying to bridge the chasm that we let separate us from God. The irony of it all is that He is constantly getting on our level, getting down where we are and building that bridge for us...but we head butt against it.

Last, there's that section of Philippians. My Bible reference says that the Apostle Paul had the last word on this Ecclesiastical concept. To paraphrase him, he recorded that he could do all things through God. Solomon may have wisely insinuated that anything short of God's tranquility was sin, but it was Paul who took that thought to it's logical conclusion and said how nothing was impossible with God on his side. There need be no settling for a handful when God provides much more. He understood that it was God's loving purpose that we should be content with ANYTHING we have, whether large or small, plenty or paucity. What's more, Paul understood that even the paucity was plenty and could be made into everything when God is his source of strength. That was the source of real peace, real tranquility. That is something to be thankful for. That is never a chasing after the wind.

And that is a good stopping point for today.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 July 2012

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless — a miserable business. Ecclesiastes 4, verses 7 and 8.

Class warfare proponents pay attention: this verse supports your arguments; or does it? In the long run that point really doesn't matter. Still, even I the ardent capitalist conservative must concede that, on the surface, this verse makes Scrooge, Bill Gates, George Soros and all the accumulated super-rich seem like fools. What point is there to accumulating such vast amounts of wealth? Sure, the super-wealthy leave for their families and donate truly staggering amounts to charity, often leaving their treasure to others. When we're gone, Bill Gates and I will be exact equals in heaven; pardon me for saying but I don't expect to see George Soros there, but I hope I'm wrong.

Before diving further into bashing the wealthy, however, let's also take note that the verse doesn't endorse poverty either. Material poverty isn't necessarily virtuous. Yesterday, my wife was on a jury that tried a pitiful case. The defendant refused to plead even though he was guilty of assaulting a police officer with a mountain of evidence proving it. The man apparently was dirt poor, unemployed, and had nothing. He got blindingly drunk, refused to take a cab home, and got nabbed for a DUI by the cops who watched the whole thing transpire. While in the squad car he was violently profane, verbally abusive, and finally assaulted the officer when they arrived at the police station. When shown all the evidence, it didn't take the jury long to convict the man who will now continue his tour of the Texas criminal justice system.

What's the point? This guy had nothing and yet he wanted less. His behavior was generally terrible and now he pays a price for that. The man squandered what little he had and was left with nothing to show for it. Was his unemployment and poverty a contributing factor to his attitude? Possibly, though I know many people who are scraping by in these hard times, and they don't act like this criminal. Still, there's nothing virtuous in being poor, either poor in spirit or poor in the worldly sense of the word. It might sound weird, but next time you pray, say a prayer for this criminal who now begins a stint in the slammer. Maybe if he had felt he had something to work for or live for things might have turned out different.

So why do so many people work so many hours? If they're providing for their families and themselves, that's a good reason. I admire it. If they enjoy their work, that's understandable; I admire this too. If they serve others, or perform roles critical or helpful to society then this is admirable as well. Me, I've never been one to be in the office at six in the morning and out at nine at night. If there is work to do, I enjoy it and I do it no matter how long it takes. When there isn't much to do, I'm bored and find the toil to be meaningless. In reading today's verse, I find not only validation but an important reminder that all the toil in the world, all the long hours at the office or in the store or with your nose to the grindstone won't buy you a place in heaven.

I think of my grandfather. He was an FHA adjuster. He worked there from the day the Philadelphia office opened during the New Deal until the day he retired 40 years later (with a short break for World War II and a short stint in Massachusetts). Grandpa Terry was a good, decent, and honest man, but he worked quite a lot and to this day I don't really understand why. I do think he enjoyed his work and enjoyed the fact that he had been well-known and well liked in the office. Work offered him a sense of purpose, a place of repose and escape from my rather 'determined' grandmother, and I'm told he was good at his job. While he worked my grandparents lived well, and his retirement was comfortable enough even as it wasn't very long. Perhaps all this is reason enough. When I think of people who, over the years, got homes and businesses started because my grandfather did his work right, even years later I find myself pleased that someone like him was there to make sure it happened.

Pleased but puzzled as well.

I'm puzzled because I find that all those years, all that work is still for nothing. He never rose very far in the civil service, and he was never famous. At his funeral, it wasn't as if hundreds of people showed up to pay tribute; there weren't that many. What's more, I can't even say it was a spiritually fulfilling job, though to be fair I really don't know. We never talked very much about it. Whether it was to pursue escape, find meaning or something else, it seems my grandfather wasn't content with his lot and kept working at it until he couldn't work any longer. It isn't up to me to judge whether or not his work was just any more than it would be up to him to judge mine. But it puzzles me because I think back on him and still find myself looking for meaning beyond just the job.

I have a good wife, children, a sister, relatives who care for me, and a home. More than any of this, I'm conscious that God has me where He has me for a reason even as I don't always understand what that reason is. I'm content to live life doing my best to make the most out of where I am and what He's given to me. My attitude on this isn't superior to my grandfather's, and to be brutally honest it may not even be superior to that of the criminal my wife's jury convicted yesterday. We all toil and work for our livelihood, and sometimes even at the peril of it. When you take all that away, the only thing left is what we believe in. If all we believed in was work, we'd be left with nothing. If we believed in working for God as He would have us work, then perhaps there's something a bit more important involved. That goes for everyone, whether you're in the upper, middle, or lower class. Classes don't matter in the realm of the Almighty and work in His service is never without meaning.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 16 July 2012

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Ecclesiastes 4, verses 9 and 10.

Did you ever see the movie “The Defiant Ones” with Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis? It’s the story of two prisoners, one black and one white, who are chained together, how they escape and how they come to know and rely on each other. It’s not an endorsement of prison, chain gangs, escape, or even race relations as they were in 1958, when the movie was made. It’s simply a compelling, well-acted story of two men who hate each other but come to care when living through adversity.

Two friends can do much more work together than one can do alone. When faced with a problem, you’re much more likely to solve it if you talk with someone. If you’re lost on the road, or if you have a question in a store, or if you want to know where is the nearest 7 Eleven, Starbucks or restroom, what do you do? You ask somebody. By working with somebody else, even for small things, we stand a better chance of success.

I can’t think of what life would be like to not have my wife. She’s become my best friend and my complete partner in all ways of life. For years, I wouldn’t say this was true. I pushed her away, thinking it was her fault I wasn’t getting the satisfaction I wanted from our relationship. My heart was hardened and we walked along separate paths even as we were still married. It resulted in much conflict and heartache. Now, after much prayer, work, trying, talking, and the love of God, we are stronger than I ever imagined we could be. It has taken years but I’m thankful every day to finally have the kind of marriage I’ve wanted for years with the person who vowed to stand by my side all those years ago. If you’re in a Christian marriage, I think you’ll agree with me that two are better than one.

God saw that it wasn’t good for Adam to be alone. The work would be too much for him to tend the entire garden and expand it out into the whole world. So, in his infinite wisdom, He made woman. Marriage should exemplify that relationship, one of wisdom, insight, and helping each other. It is good for two to be together, to be one, to have somebody to live and partner with, to have somebody to rely on.

Re-read the verse and notice a few other things as well. The verses immediately preceding this one talk about how it isn’t good for a man to toil alone without a son or brother. That’s no coincidence; location, location, location. Today’s verse applies to that work as well, amplifying the earlier thought.

It also takes it to a different level, talking about profit. The good capitalist in me likes the idea of profit, namely something gained for something done. Life is full of profit, from what kids gain at a lemonade stand to the millionaire investment banker who gains millions by having his name on the company letterhead (even if he doesn’t actively manage the company). Profit is what drives our economy.

Want to know a secret? Profit is an outcome of faith as well. You and I profit from faith in God, not because of anything we’ve done but because of something He did. We gain extra, we gain a reward for giving our hearts and hitching our star to His. On your own, it becomes impossible to do the work of salvation. With two, specifically God and you, you’re in. What He did for you is profit for you. No, it isn’t the same direct concept as that effete millionaire, but the principle is similar. We gain because we partner with somebody who worked on our behalf.

I’ll admit that part of me struggles with that concept. It’s vain and even a little selfish to think that I should believe in God just to get the benefit of doing so. Believe and gain eternal life; tit for tat, right? No, not really. If it were a natural, human transaction maybe that would be so, but it isn’t. He provides something and did something that no human could or would do. The selfless part comes into play when you realize that you believe out of love – out of love that He gives and out of love that you genuinely feel – and that the end profit isn’t your goal: it’s the in-progress love. That we would gain life from believing is indeed profitable but the more you believe the less you see that as the goal even as it is still very true.

What becomes even more amazing is that this happens even as you and I are actually the defiant ones. We are trying to escape our worries in life, thinking that if we turn from real peace and goodness we'll be able to escape on our own and break free. In reality, that choice still leaves us in chains. When we choose to partner with the good people He puts in our lives we stand a better chance of success at achieving happiness. What's more, when we partner with Him and all He has done in this world, we are assured of real gain, real profit, real success and real freedom. Those aren't material things and when we discover that, we get to discover that we don't need them to be.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 17 July 2012

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Ecclesiastes 4, verse 11.

One of my favorite movies is a James Bond movie: "The Spy Who Loved Me." It was made in the late 1970s, back when Roger Moore was 007, and he was at the height of his goofy interpretation of the world's coolest secret agent. The movie pits 007 against a wealthy industrialist who wants to drown the world. In saving the planet from a watery fate, 007 teams up with a Soviet agent, who just happened to be named "Triple X" (or "XXX" and who just happened to be Ringo Starr's wife, Barbara Bach). It's really pretty corny, and it's laden with the double entendres that became part of the movie series' trademark.

One of them is when Bond and his Soviet paramour are talking about ways to survive in the wild. Naturally, the alluring girl takes the lead in describing how she would survive on a cold night. To preserve body heat, "shared bodily warmth" was required, preferably between two people shed of both their inhibitions and their outer garments. You can imagine the rest.

You and I are cold on our own. We are fragile. We aren't 007 and we aren't indestructible. It's no coincidence that, other than the notes on a scale, the only thing I think country music and hip hop have in common is their celebration of two people keeping warm. Let's face it: the natural world is cold. A few weeks ago we were in the desert where it quickly rose from 70 in the early morning to 100 a few hours later. Even in the middle of the summer, if you found yourself stranded there at midnight, you'd better have your blanket handy. It gets chilly at night even when 'chilly' only means 65 or 70 degrees. After a day in which the temp might have been 105, that isn't warm. If your core temperature got that low, you'd die. Without something, or someone, to warm you your chances of survival are greatly diminished.

It's another reason for partnership, for having someone beside you who cares enough to keep you warm but also enough to let you warm them. Like we mentioned yesterday, God made Adam and Eve for each other, for a reason. It wasn't some random idea: there was purpose; there was reason. According to today's verse, one reason we may infer is warmth. Man and woman: we keep each other warm. I'll admit: being alone is one drawback to being on the road so many nights each year. I miss my wife, having someone there beside me. I might prefer to travel alone, work alone, and have my schedule to myself versus traveling with a co-worker or team. But I'd be lying if I told you that I don't miss having my honey around at night.

If you think about it, too, this verse means more. God's love fits perfect in our lives; we were designed to live within it. In all of human history, only God Himself on the cross was ever truly alone. In those hours and dying minutes there, He was alone in the world like nobody had ever been before (or has ever been since). Spiritually cut off, rejected by the people who had worshipped him only days before, dying the death of a common thug, He hung there in total solitude. He did it to warm our souls from a chilly death. He did it because, until He did, we were indeed cold and dead. We couldn't do this ourselves; we needed His help. How can one keep warm alone? How can one alone keep alive the spirit of man? The answer is "we can't." Not on our own. We need help, even when we think we don't. We need help and we need it from God.

In the spirit of the movie I mentioned, "nobody does it better."

Speaking of the movie, let's get back to James Bond. Of course the next scene involves international espionage via lip-lock. Of course there are lots of outlandish gadgets. Of course 007 gets the girl in the end and signs off with a trademark quip, courtesy of a cheeky screenwriter. Of course this is one of those movies my kids would never watch with me because they are way too cool to watch such stupid things with their old man. It really is a campy over-blown movie and I think one of the reasons I enjoy it is just because it is that way. That was one of the first movies I ever wanted to go see on my own, when my parents would let me go see a PG movie without them; to be honest, though, I don't think I did. Still, it's a reminder of my childhood, and it's a reminder of how shared bodily warmth can warm you to your soul when you're sharing with the right person forever.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 July 2012

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4, verse 12.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. That's the part of this verse I've heard most often. It almost sounds like a quote from Confucius or some other Eastern philosopher. That it's true is beyond ridicule. That it's wise is beyond compare. That it's from the book of Ecclesiastes may be the part you (and certainly me) may not have known before.

It's a very true thing though. In the context of defending yourself or even going on offense, there is safety in numbers. A good football team is one where the entire line acts as one to execute a play. Each person does their part, moving forward, moving in position, blocking and tackling and doing what is planned & required to advance the team as a whole. When they do that, their cord, their line, is not easily broken. Like in a football game, life hits us back, though. There are always other teams playing against us, or working to advance their goals, their plays, in the same manner.

The key is faith. As a coach directs the quarterback to lead the offense, so God also directs you and I to go on offense in our lives even as it seems like we're always playing defense. His Word is our guide, our playbook. It tells us not only how to live our lives and make our choices, but it also actively engages us and changes how we act, who we are, and what we believe. God is always powerfully at work in us doing these things, yet none of them can happen without our having faith in Him to do them. When that happens, we are invincible. To quote Isaiah, no weapon formed against you shall prosper. Your cord of three strands will not easily be broken.

But let's not forget the first part of the verse, the one that talks about overpowering and defense. If you read the Bible in the order in which the books are presented, by the time you get to Ecclesiastes you've already gone through Genesis, Exodus, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, Psalms and a number of other books. One of the recurring subjects in those books is war, man's inhumanity (and un-Godliness) to man through war. In some cases, the stories talk about how Israel smacked down its enemies and overcome great odds through faith in God. In other cases the books outline how Israel got its collective clock cleaned.

In all cases, the books talk about how there is strength in numbers. Israel never fought alone: it always fought with God at its side. When its motives were wrong or its faith misplaced, God turned Israel over to its enemies; smackdown. When they stuck by their God and let Him take the lead, Israel consistently overcame. It did so because it learned that an army of one is useless where an army of two can be impenetrable.

That army of two needs to include, at least, your God and yourself. I think of David standing alone against the Philistines. They had threatened, ridiculed, mocked and amassed against the best Israel could muster when out from the crowd walks this puny shepherd boy who boldly proclaims that theirs is the army of the living God and that they will fall to Him. You know the story: you know what happens next. Hence, an army of your God and yourself can overcome any odds, even the hordes of darkness and evil.

A Godly defense is a Godly thing. God doesn't say we'll be sheltered in this world. Indeed, he throws us in the deep end of life to teach us to swim, to rely on Him. God doesn't tell us to give up: He tells us to trust Him. God has been fighting battles for the people who revere him since the beginning of time. There is zero reason to think that anything has changed despite our oh so primitive but modern inventions like nuclear weapons, the internet, smart bombs, or anything sold at Walmart. Just like the Israelites of old, when we rely on Him we are not easily overpowered.

On Monday's flight to Minnesota, I watched "300." It's hardly a Godly movie, and it's hardly a movie I'd recommend to build up your faith...except...except that there are great lessons of faith to be learned from what the real Spartans did there at Thermopylae. Two are indeed stronger than one; two (or in this case three hundred) can hold out against a much larger army. The Spartans weren't easily broken. They were, in fact,

slaughtered in order to buy time for the other nation-states of Greece to rise and meet the Persian threat, which eventually they did. Through training, determination, and faith (in each other) their army held out much longer against an army vastly superior in numbers. In doing so, they saved the budding Western civilization.

And, living in Texas, I can't help but think about the defenders of the Alamo, how just over 250 trained, armed and determined Texans held off the thousands-strong national army of Santa Anna. The Texan patriots there died to buy time for another army to gather, regroup, and await an eventual battle of liberation. A few weeks after the slaughter at the Alamo, that's exactly what happened when Texas won its independence at San Jacinto.

This isn't to say that Scripture endorses warfare. Indeed, I believe God must have been just as grieved by every death, Persian or Greek at Thermopylae and every death, Texan and Mexican, at the Alamo. Yet where one side would fight for right in God's name and the other wouldn't, I believe God is not impartial. The lesson of the verse, then, is to rely on God as our stronger partner in living life as in waging battle.

When we do that – when we live and wage our lives in faith – we see how we can always defend ourselves through God, how He is always working in us for the best. And when that happens, our cord is not quickly broken.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 19 July 2012

Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 4, verses 13 – 16.

Throughout my life I have resented the generation that came before me. My own parents were children of the Depression. My sister and I grew up hearing stories of what it was like to grow up in the Great Depression, and then World War II. We heard stories of hoboes coming to my grandmother's door and offering to sweep her kitchen for a meal. Or of how my grandfather would take barter in exchange for the cattle feed he sold from his Princeton Mill. We were told stories of my father's family, summering on the Jersey shore, hearing far off booms and thunder over the ocean and then finding refuse and debris on the shore the next morning from ships sunk by German U-boats off the eastern seaboard overnight. We were told of hard times, rationing, simpler days, of my grandfather sailing into Nagasaki after the second A-bomb was dropped, and of what it was like for all those soldiers to come home from the terrible war.

All my life I have spent resenting the generation that came after this one, the self-serving, pampered, over-educated and over-indulged generation that thrived on free love, promiscuous sex, overturning authority and illicit drugs. I resented the fact that they took the good and prosperous nation of laws bequeathed to them and have squandered it on the vicissitudes of their untamed and undisciplined free spirit. They were given so much yet wasted it at the behest of a few popular leaders who were without honor, dignity and common sense. A generation without discipline is a generation without disciples of the heart, and without honor or respect. Though some have stood out, most of that Baby Boom generation I have held in contempt for how they squandered their birthright for a price cheaper than thirty pieces of silver. You can dress up a pig and exclaim it to be your king, but after all the cries and adulation die down all you have is a dressed up pig. This is what I thought of the generation that came after what we now call "the Greatest Generation."

I see now, as I run headlong into middle age and its following decrepitude, that this is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

It is meaningless because, just like those minstrel sirens Sonny and Cher sang, "the teeny bopper is our newborn king" (uh huh). Our world worships youth and chases it, follows it relentlessly. In this week of blogging about movies, I'll tell you that I recently watched the latest (maybe last) 'Pirates of the Caribbean' movie. This is the one where Captain Jack Sparrow is chasing the fountain of youth. The tale is hundreds of years old but the theme really isn't so new: the fountain of youth. Who would really want such a thing? Do you want to be young forever?

I remember, back in 1985 – and how strange does it sound to say that? – when I attended a congress for my church, the nascent Presbyterian Church, USA, formed only that year at the General Assembly in Indianapolis. I served there as a youth advisory delegate – a YAD – whose only real role was to advocate issues of the youth the assembly. You're right: it was fairly meaningless, except that one night the lead youth advisor came to me asking for my help in writing a youth creed for the convention. He and I stayed up the next night, perfecting a draft I had written, and the next day I got to stand before the convention and lead 3000 people reciting my words. Their theme was "celebrate youth."

Captain Jack Sparrow couldn't have done better, and neither could your best baby boomer. Twenty seven years later, I'm still proud of those words and yet I see that they are largely meaningless, forgotten, and a chasing after the wind. Our world chases foolishly after the young. We tailor products to the young; we idealize the halcyon years of schooling; we elect unqualified but young leaders to office over those who are more tried and true in the realities of life. The world will follow the young because the young have vision, energy, nerve, and drive. As we grow older, those qualities ebb and we crave them for our own. So we follow again, allowing ourselves to be led into things that may or may not be for our own good.

And in the end, without being led by God, they are a meaningless chasing after the wind.

These days, I find myself at the top of my career. Though not wealthy, I am respected for what I do because I do my work well. I have advanced because the talents I've learned, through the assistance of allies and experience, and in spite of the odds set before me. No government is due my thanks for building some road in front of me: I walked beyond that long ago and without their help. As I reach the mid-point of what I think will be my career, I look back and am thankful to be where I am, where years and maturity have brought me out of the hell-fire that was some days of my youth. Yet if you offered me the world or just one moment more with God, I would gladly take that moment instead and tell you to keep that world for all the good it would do you. I'm thankful for my youth, but I'd rather die now than live through it again or think that being young is being better than where I am today.

Because where I am today is learning to set aside the resentment that I carried around for far too long. I resented the inference that 'it' had all already been done and that my time was a day late and dollar short. I resented thinking that the old music was better, the golden age was done, all the words had been spoken, and the best was already behind us. These days, I reject all that. In my moment with God, the world can have its fountain of youth, Woodstock, all the sex, drugs and rock & roll it can find, and all the host of crap that goes with it. The world can keep that. I'll take Jesus. Do you want to be young forever? Follow Him. THAT is the only way.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 20 July 2012

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 1.

The church I attend is REALLY low key; for a Missouri Synod Lutheran church (which are traditionally extremely traditional), it's almost radical. If you go into Water's Edge looking for pastors in robes, a formal choir, and organ pipes, well, you might want to alter your expectations. There is no choir but there is a praise band. You won't hear many of the same songs; they sing quite a few new ones written by the music leader. We rarely say the Apostle's Creed and not even the Lord's Prayer very often. Dig a bit deeper and you see there are few committees, no deacons, re-branded leadership positions, and no office in the church building. A 'young' church (re-branded itself less than a decade ago), the congregation has already split numerous times to seed 3 other churches in the North Texas area and numerous missions worldwide. And (most shocking of all) it's quite ok – even welcomed – to applaud when moved to do so.

But let the bragging stop NOW because one thing that isn't low key is the Word of God. If you come through the doors, be prepared to hear the Word. There is no compromise on teaching the Word unashamedly and boldly and truly. You won't find the usual trappings of a Lutheran church, but you will find both the basic elements and the same bold Word of God. It's usually thought-provoking, and it's usually a message that cuts to the core of things I need to hear to help me tackle my week.

Knowing that, I will admit that I sometimes find it hard to remember to guard my steps and be reverent when I walk into my church building. It's hard to get my arms around the idea that 'church' isn't a place but people living our lives. It's easy to get caught up in being proud of these things, of being a part of it. Not surprisingly, our church is undergoing something of an identity crisis, where practices are called into question, growth is stalling, and people are being pulled in many directions. It's an attack by the enemy and one way in which that attack works is through how our reverence is shown. Going to church wearing blue jeans also has the drawback of familiarity. I hear (and support) the argument that 'God doesn't care what you wear to church.' God simply wants our best. For me, sometimes that's a nice pair of jeans or shorts, and sometimes it means slacks and a shirt, maybe even the occasional necktie. And yet I find myself sometimes feeling TOO familiar, too casual. Sunday worship is meant to be a place where we are fueled to worship EVERYWHERE in our lives, not just in that big room beyond the narthex.

To do that, we should be respectful and reverent. Here's something you might not have thought, though: God wants that respect and reverence for OUR benefit, not really His. Huh? The all-powerful creator of the Universe who used to smite Amalekites, Hittites, Philistines and Hollywood wants us to be reverent and respectful for our benefit? Yep! Think about it: listening is learning and listening is loving. He constantly works in our lives, arranging opportunities for us to turn to Him for peace in a world full of stress and chaos. He knows we learn to love by listening, and then listen to love and learn. A raucous atmosphere is no atmosphere in which to reverently listen. I struggle with that, both in how I prepare for worship and then in how I participate in it.

This is the way of youth. Though the church is pastured by a man in his middle age (hey, he's younger than me!), the attitude is to be fresh because God's word is always fresh. Fresh isn't necessarily an attitude only of the young, but I think it is the young who are freshest, who best embody the idea of being fresh. That's how God's word is, and how He wants to transform our hearts in it. He renews us through it; He builds, tears away, cuts to the quick, encourages, teaches, rebukes, and freshens our hearts and minds through the work of His Word.

So here's a thought: the old sacrificial system was done by fools. God commanded it, but fools carried it out. Most of the churches in which I've belonged have been of the WASPish, 'boring' mainline denominations; very much Lutheran or Presbyterian dullness instead of the hellfire and brimstone Baptist, Assemblies of God or Pentecostal flavors. Both are right, but I was raised in a, shall we say, atmosphere of dull worship. One thing I've learned is that all the old systems, the old traditions, the old things don't work on me the way they used to. They aren't inappropriate and God bless the people who thrive because of them. It just doesn't work for me in

the same way, so I flock to a place of like-minded practice. I want to be challenged differently, and the liturgy that used to encourage me doesn't do so in the same way these days. I don't want some idiot with perfect hair and a three piece suit yelling at me about "GAWD" either and screaming about how the Old Testament prophets were better than us; give me a break (oh, and Reverend Perfect, you have something stuck in your teeth...). The people who made those liturgies and the people who thrived on leading their churches like revival meetings were just as foolish as those who never did that at all. The system, the worship, was made for us, not us for it. As Christ put it, the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath. It's about the heart revering God, not about God insisting we do A, B or C worldly actions or we're damned. Style is irrelevant. Substance is everywhere if we turn aside the distractions and allow God to work on our hearts.

Finally, in this whole vein of low-key worship, I see how foolishness is ignorant. Ignorant people may be fools but foolish people ARE ignorant. That's me sometimes. I let myself get distracted by things that don't really matter like how long the pastor talks, how there is rarely a unified worship 'theme,' or how many newly-penned songs we sing versus the tried and true favorites from 500 years of Reformation tradition. It's foolishness and foolishness breeds ignorance, both the un-knowing brand of ignorance and the "I'm stupid" brand as well. When I don't know something, I may be both ignorant and a fool and this by harmless coincidence. But when I close off my heart to what God is really saying in these things, I DO become both ignorant and a fool, this time by my own hard-heartedness. When that happens, I find I'm most at risk of becoming one who would offer the sacrifice of fools, who does not know that I am doing wrong.

I don't really have a movie example to cite with this line of thought, but we do watch quite a few movie scenes and clips from Youtube in my church. It isn't unusual to watch a short clip of something totally off the wall to help open your mind to new possibilities. You don't have to be low-key to do that, though. You simply have to revere God in your best way and allow Him to do what He does, to have His way, in your life.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 23 July 2012

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 2 and 3.

Do you sometimes babble? I do. It's late at night when I'm writing this and I can't sleep; I have insomnia. I think the reason I'm up so late is because I had too much caffeine too late in the evening, but now I have too many things running through my mind and it seems like a stream of meaningless junk. My legs are sore from running yesterday. The temporary resident of my middle bedroom is out late again and who knows when or if she's coming home. There is much to be done this week on my project, planning out the installation of software and writing hundreds of test cases for the ICD-10 project. I haven't ever replaced a water pump on a car before but I will be doing that on my son's car later this week and I'm a bit leery on just how to do it. Money is tight at the moment. I'm glad to have my son home safe & sound from his mission trip. There is too much cat hair on my pillow because the cat spends all day long hunkered under the covers on my bed. I'm finishing up a really good book. After watching 'Dallas' last week, I think it would really suck to be John Ross Ewing. Yep. Babbling.

And do you babble in prayer? Sometimes I do. I think I've said it here before that one of the more effective ways I've found to cure insomnia is to pray; yes, I tried it already. Forget the sleeping pills or late night TV (I don't care much for the TV anyway): I've found that praying late at night when I can't sleep helps me to get to the root of what's keeping me awake so I can let it go. I sometimes wonder, though, if God doesn't listen to my prayers and think I'm babbling. I oscillate between asking for help, asking for forgiveness and thanking Him for every little thing that comes to mind (or heart). The whole thing seems like it risks into a Faulkner-esque stream of consciousness. It's true that this usually helps me get to the nub of what's keeping me awake, but to tell you the truth, usually I am sure it just sounds like babbling.

It shouldn't be that way. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 1 talked about how our worship should be reverent. That means everything we do but especially our time before the Almighty. Not boring, robotic, rigid or solemn but reverent. It's logical, then, that verses 2 and 3 should remind us that quick words without thought behind them aren't reverent. Too often they can turn our reverent worship into something else. For instance, I have regrets over hasty judgments and hasty words. Too many times in my life I have been quick to judge someone or something, and then I've let my mouth do the rest. I'll admit that I fear God if He is fair in judging my speech because I haven't always been reverent, I haven't always been thoughtful, and I haven't always been patient or even loving. Late at night, the demons come to attack me with these regrets. Over time, they come less and less the farther I get from bad times, but when it happens, it seems like babble from below.

And yet...and yet in all this I find comfort. I find comfort that God may indeed find some of what I say to be babbling, but He also is much more patient than I am. There's comfort in knowing that God looks into my heart and sees what's really there, which I take to be a good thing since He could have struck me down a long time ago for all the stunts I've pulled. Where I've been a fool, God is patient and wise; where I think I have been wise, God is encouraging, even when He shows up my wisdom for the foolishness it sometimes is. And in all things, God gives us the opportunity to be hungry for Him, hungry for more even when we've babbled, boggled ourselves, or botched things up. When we come back to Him, He satisfies and forgives while instilling a righteous and pure hunger to know Him more.

Finally, there's a reassurance about those prayers themselves. With prayer, when we honestly open our hearts to Him, He sees it. When we're in communication with His spirit, there is no babbling. There may indeed be much we have to say and sometimes that may seem like it's all over the map. It's like pouring Lego's out of a box. They're all shapes and sizes but they all fit together, you know? Sometimes our thoughts are like that, but God wants to hear them, especially if they're cluttering up other matters that are underneath. To get to those, maybe we have to pick away the clutter up above. All of it matters.

Hence, it's nearly two AM and when I'm done with this writing, I'll go back to bed and go back to praying. The middle kid is home, safe and sound. At one in the morning, there isn't much I can or should try to do about all

those other things, so I'll go have some quality time with the Maker. At the end of it, like the song says, there will be peace in the valley for me. And you too.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 24 July 2012

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 4.

I think if you talk with my kids they would tell you that I'm something of a cream puff. I'm ashamed to say that, at one time, two of my kids were afraid of me. I had a volcanic temper and I was harsh. I loved them fully, but I didn't show it lovingly. No, I wasn't abusive but neither was I very kind. In the last few years, I've worked to adjust my behavior, moving more into a listening role and managing my temper. When I turned over my life to God, my attitude changed. The things that used to bother me don't really bother me anymore, and new things don't really bother me much at all.

It's changed to the extent that I think of myself as something of a pushover. Like I said, cream puff. My oldest kid would tell you that I'm much easier on the youngest than I ever was with her; that's true. I learned that every battle isn't worth fighting anymore; as long as principles aren't in danger, most battles just aren't worth all the stress. Empowering kids to make choices and learn from them is a better way. It's what God does for us, and He's a wise father, so I finally got on board the clue bus and figured that it must be the right thing to do. I know God isn't a cream puff and He isn't some wuss. Instead, He's the ideal role model. A better man would have learned this long ago.

The biblegateway.com reference that I use in researching these verses entitles this section of Ecclesiastes "stand in awe of God." If you remember, the last few days have talked about being reverent in front of God, and how we should watch our words and take them seriously. In the vein of standing in awe of God, we're also well-advised to do what we say we're going to do and be quick about it! When I read that, my mind immediately thinks of God as that stern father, the one who could think that children should be seen and not heard. God takes our vows seriously, the big ones and the small ones. I've broken many vows from the small promises to play games with the kids when they were little to the major vows of fidelity to my wife. Now that I'm older, I see how I should have kept all of them, the big and little alike. God could hammer me if He wanted to, and today's verse drives that point home: God doesn't tolerate the words of fools.

That's part of my hang-up: I'm stuck on the image of God being a stern father. I feel like He could be the kind of father who sternly, firmly takes no pleasure in the words of fools like me. For all those vows I've broken, I'm stuck on this image of God being a father, not a dad. Of Him rebuking me for all the things my guilty heart knows I've done wrong, sending me off to bed without dinner, telling me to sit down and shut up. This God is the Father-God of Shaker roots, of my stern German Lutheran forbears. He doesn't seem very loving even though He seems pious and just. I'm reading the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, and this God fits quite well in the picture I get from reading Moses' words. He expects us to do what we say without complaining.

And yet that isn't the God I know; the image contradicts the reality I see, taste and touch. It's not the one Jesus knew either. He was in complete and total union with God as Son, Father and Spirit, three in one at all times. He embraced and loved God's pure fatherly power, yet when the chips were down he called God the Father "Abba." In Hebrew, that means "Daddy." God the Son thought so intimately, personally and adoringly of God the Father to correctly call Him "Daddy." God the Son knew that His Daddy took all vows, all holiness seriously and yet He still knew Him as someone personal to whom you or I could easily relate. I stopped calling my own father Daddy sometime in the middle of elementary school; he was always just Dad to me afterwards. Only one of my three kids still calls me 'daddy.' Another doesn't; I'm just "Dad." And another sometimes does and sometimes doesn't; it depends on the mood. I like it when the kids call me whatever they will, but I know I'm especially dear if they call me "daddy." God the Son called His Father Daddy too, knowing He would expect the Son to keep His words but gently encouraging Him to do so instead of hammering Him with fists of justice.

Such things give me a greater appreciation of God. Sure, I'm in awe of Him when I consider that phenomenal power He has. That massive power supports the true side of God that is the stern Father, the one possessing that sometimes harsh justice. But to tell you the truth, because I'm kind of a softy, I am more in awe of Him

when I consider how He sets aside that power and miraculously shows Himself through the simple things. I saw God today in the picture of my friend's newborn daughter, and the determination of the overweight man on the treadmill who was exercising to change his life. I saw my Daddy-God in the blue sky looking through the peach tree outside my window, and in the laugh of my son and daughter. I felt His calming presence when I prayed to tell Him what was on my heart, and how I'm sorry for the rotten things I thought about yesterday, and I felt Him relaxing with us while my wife, son and I watched a movie last night. God is shown in the magnificence of this world; it reflects His awesome nature, yet He is found in the simpler things, too, which also show Him as He is.

These days I'm closer to being a 'granddaddy' than I am to being a young daddy. I don't know what those unknown grandchildren will call me, but I'm sure it will be something memorable, maybe even appropriate. I hope they see the side of me that stands up for what I believe and the people I love; I hope they know that even I have principles and hold certain things to be unassailable. Even more, though, I hope they see me as somebody they can love and want to be around, someone who will keep their word and vows to them. I hope they love me as a man who has their back, and as someone who loves them with the simple care of a daddy to a young girl or boy.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 25 July 2012

It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 5

File this one under the common sense folder, will ya? A few weeks ago, I made a deal with my son. Pass your classes for the semester and I'll take you to Six Flags. Here in North Texas, where Six Flags is a big deal (because it is the home of the original Six Flags...those six flags are the national flags that have flown over Texas), that's no small thing, especially since a day at the amusement park is a costly affair. True to his drive, Son Bull knuckled down and passed his classes so, true to my word, one Saturday I surprised him and off we went to Arlington.

I think he was skeptical that I would actually follow through because, like too many other parents, I've made big promises that I didn't keep. For many of them, the promises were made and couldn't be kept because circumstances had changed (for either – or both – the promise-maker and the promise-acceptor). For some, I'll admit that I would promise something against improbable odds only to find the improbable had become possible. And for some, I simply forgot.

So I couldn't blame him for being skeptical. I think we enjoyed ourselves as much because we like each others' company as for the thrill of the rides and enjoying this simple truth: I kept my word and he received it. That's a Godly thing to do; verse 5 confirms it.

Here's a list of things that it's better to not vow to do than to vow and not do. Take it from me: it's a good list. Be there. Stay the night. Hold a grudge. Clean the garage (and weed the patio before your in-laws visit). Call. Meet for drinks. Promise dinner; promise breakfast. Be there for every performance. You can probably think of many others. It's better to just keep quiet than to promise to do things like this if you think or know you might not be able to. Less damage is done to the person who might just be counting on you and your word.

That's just the way we're designed. It's not just common sense: it's Godly design. Yesterday's verse talked about quickly keeping our word to God and our images of God as a father. I think this verse is the kind of thing a father would say; I know I would. It's the kind of verse that a divine Father DID say in fact given that all Scripture is God-inspired. Face it: unbelievers would be more likely to continue in unbelief if they see believers not keeping their word. Promise to be someplace and you aren't? Not surprising for a Sunday morning Christian. Promise to call and you don't? Hardly a surprise when you don't put your money where your mouth is. Unfaithful? No surprise at all if you don't sink your teeth into what faith really means and what God is trying to tell you in thought, word and action.

Like I said: common sense.

This is a summer of trying to build common sense in my family. Like every other family, we're undergoing changes. Son Bull is building back from some life experiences that cost him and taught him dearly. Middle Sister (the one with the wine named after her) is moving out (again) to a new apartment and a new job. Oldest Daughter is struggling with work and planning a wedding that is now, according to her to-the-second clock, four months and fourteen days away. The Woman of the House is still juggling a very difficult job with the lives of the difficult people who live in her house. And yours truly is undertaking various projects, both in and out of work, both in my vocation and in my quest to be published (as well as a score of pre-wedding honey'do's).

The bond that holds all those things together is our faith. The kids are wrestling with their faith journey in various ways, but I know that they are at least wrestling and not ignoring it. Years ago they each vowed to believe, to explore, to test and question, and to grow in that faith. I pity those whose faith doesn't grow through trial, or even through testing the limits of the vows we make. That's one way in which we see the true meaning of them. It is better to not make those vows than to make and not keep them, and better still is to vow what we mean and then keep it. The payoff is in the closer relationship with God, knowing we are in communion with Him and sharing that with each other. Just last night I had a terrible dream in which I lost my wife. The

devastating part of it came when I realized that all the small things I enjoy about her – her voice, her standard message when she calls me on the phone, the way she never uses a white washcloth in this set of green towels we have, things like that – those would be gone forever. The best thing I've done in life is to make a vow to her that I'm keeping because for too long I sought to discard it. That, and not the vow, would have been the tragic undoing of that bond.

Which is why I'm keeping my word to my son this summer. His heart is worth it. As I mentioned, he's working back from some challenges earlier this year, getting on top of things in his young life before they get on top of him. I've promised him a trip to the local man-spa this weekend for a haircut, shave and shoulder massage. Men, if you've never been to a real tonsorial parlor, treat yourself soon. In the whole spa thing, women have it right. Once he's met the next goal, I'm thinking a day of skeet shooting or maybe renting a boat up on Lake Texoma. I gave him my word and we're building trust through that. In doing so, it's building a bond between himself, me and our God. It's a Godly thing and I intend to keep it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 26 July 2012

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God . Ecclesiastes 5, verses 6 and 7.

There is so much to discuss from these 2 verses that even I, the most verbose of men, couldn't say it all. Yes, that's a rarity; please record that admission because doesn't happen very often. So let's chunk it down and dissect it bit by bit. Remember that the overall theme of the first few verses of Ecclesiastes 5 is to be in awe of God. We should not make vows we don't intend to keep. In a way, the verses are an extension of the ninth Commandment (yes, I had to look it up; I forget the order of most of them). You shall not lie. We must not make vows we don't intend to keep because that would be nothing more than a lie.

"Do not let your mouth lead you into sin." Building on that last thought, don't promise things you can't deliver. Don't say one thing and mean another. Or, to take it to another level, let's get all Thumper: "If you don't got nothin nice to say, don't say nothin at all." It's obviously more common sense, even if you reject the idea of human sin. Don't let your words get you into trouble. Like saying it is better to not vow than to deliberately make a bad one, it's better to be silent than to say things that lead us into sins. How many times do I wish I had kept my mouth shut instead of doing things or undertaking things that turned into sinful disasters? How much time do you have to keep reading? It's common sense.

Who is the temple messenger? I did a little research on this. The temple messenger could be a priest, or in our case a minister. In the time of ancient Israel, it was the role of the Jewish priests (as judges) to determine what vows and oaths should be kept. Though God wanted His people to keep their word no matter what, then as now, people were legalistic. They wanted someone to decide. Older translations of the verse replace 'priest' or 'temple messenger' with angel, and this is consistent because people made (and make) vows before God's angels. The angels are intermediaries between man and God. Neither divine nor human, they are go-betweens who serve God by assisting men. I believe in angels. Twice in the sphere of my influence I know of interventions that no human could have controlled, once very recently in fact. We should guard our words because those who intermediate with God on our behalf aren't beings to trifle with. If you don't believe me, read up on the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He didn't guard his words in front of the angel Gabriel and it got him nine months of silence.

Does God destroy our work and our words? This is tougher for me to tackle. God can destroy, He has, and He does. When something we do runs contrary to God's purpose in our lives, He can and does tear it up. He's God and He has that power. Still, I like to think that, when destruction comes into our lives, it's usually more of a consequence of our actions – our choices – that God allows to occur. We mostly bring it on ourselves contrary to the good that God desires. Sure, random destruction happens and sometimes it happens out of the blue; there's no way to say 'we brought that on.' Even in those times, I believe it is more an instance of God allowing chaos to enter our lives for our eventual good. Sometimes parents do that, you know. I feel for Him because, on a billion-person global scale, He watches it happen every minute of every day. It's an awesome responsibility but He's God and He can handle it. Still, I'm a parent too and I know it's hard for me to stand back and watch sometimes. I can't imagine how He must endure it.

Dreaming and verbosity are meaningless. Kenny Rogers sang it: "don't fall in love with a dreamer." I wish someone had told my wife what I dreamer I am. It would have spared her much heartache, yet I also think it may be one of the things she likes about me. But here's the thing: God doesn't need our daydreams or our words. He's God and He already knows how things turn out, both in the world and in our lives, but we don't and He lovingly allows things to unfold as they do. When our dreams interfere with keeping our word, trouble usually ensues. Too many of them and too much talking about what isn't, what could be, or what we wish takes away from us living in the moment where God is constantly at work. I think that's why this reminder is here. God doesn't dream of what could be. He's God, and He's the only real dream come true. I used to dream of what it would be like to win the lottery, be self-reliant, and be wealthy. I don't do that so much anymore. These days, I prefer to simply rely on God while using the talents He gave to me and make the most of what I can.

Finally, we should be in complete awe of God. Not the powerless, I can't function kind of awe, but the 'I'm inspired to do anything for Him' kind of awe. One source I reviewed for verse 7 said 'Having the fear of the Lord means "holding God in such Awe that you are wholeheartedly motivated to pursue His holiness & His service.'" (Bell, Sermon Notes, Ecclesiastes 5, http://preceptaustin.org/ecclesiastes_commentaries.htm). I'm hearing AC/DC trebling in my head; "you've been thunderstruck" (which, by the way, is a totally addictive song). I hope to see God one day with my own eyes. Like Job, I hope to look on my creator and my redeemer with my own eyes and live forever there with Him in complete awe. Until then – and after then – I want to live in awe of Him as I learn about Him here. It isn't hard to do. Think of how you feel when you realize you love the people you do. That's an awesome, awe-inspiring thing. That's how we should live as concerns God.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 27 July 2012

If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 8 and 9.

Yesterday I took a book back to my local library. It was called "Throw Them All Out" by a man named Peter Schweizer, and it was about how high ranking members of the US Government, mostly in the US Congress, use the system of our government to enrich themselves. Most of their profit-taking is done through legally trading on inside information concerning upcoming legislation. Throughout most of our history, Congress legally exempted itself from prosecution under the insider trading laws by which most Americans must abide. Hence, the subject of the book, outlining how people come to Congress well off, spend a short career (or a long one), and leave as millionaires: all from profiting over things that would land me in jail if I did them.

I didn't read the entire book because the idea of it made me sick. That public servants would enrich themselves is nothing new; re-read verses 8 and 9. 'The king' has always gotten richer off our work, as do the men and women below him. That's government. I think it's been happening as long as people have had government. That people would become so obscenely rich through public service is nauseating. The levels of corruption that the author outlined in just the few chapters I read made me want to perform a citizen's arrest on the no good so & so's who live inside the Washington Beltway. It's no use blaming either the Democrats or the Republicans: both are equally slimy, guilty and reprehensible. WE have allowed it to happen.

Ah representative democracy.

And the thing about it is that the poor in America live by royal standards compared to the poor in other countries. Yes, there is oppression here but it isn't the kind of flagrant, life-threatening kind that exists elsewhere. Just last week, two ex-patriot members of my wife's family were murdered in Mexico. We don't know all the specifics, but it looks like they somehow crossed the local cartels, those local drug kingpins. If you speak out against your local party official in some rural Chinese hamlet, chances are you'll get a knock on the door the next day and you'll live out the rest of your life in some Gobi Desert gulag. Or if you speak out against the powers that be in some nations in Africa, or in Venezuela, or Iran, you may be shot dead.

And yet God still provides for us all and is not indifferent to our plight or to how 'the king' profits from our fields. Way back in the days of the Bible God warned the Israelites that they didn't want a king. They wanted to be like the other nations around them, having the kind of power, structure, and commanding authority that came from a monarchy. At the time, Israel was ruled by judges and priests, and God repeatedly warned them that a king would institute hierarchical government that would eventually slide into tyranny. "Give us a king," pleaded the Israelites, so God acquiesced. Centuries of monarchy ensued, and while there were good kings like David, Solomon and a few others, most were corrupt. Lord Acton was right about what absolute power does, you know: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Later in that same quote he added, "There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it."

He could have been talking about Ecclesiastes 5 taken to its natural conclusion.

What to do? After all, we need some kind of government. Pure democracy would be more dysfunctional than the representative republican (little r) flavor under which we live in the US. Governments are instituted BY GOD EVEN to do things for people that they can't effectively do themselves. Dictators are evil, and tyranny is evil even when it is a constitutional tyranny. Indeed, God didn't give His people no government, but one that He knew to be best for their mission to come back to Him (even when that meant the corrupt monarchy of Saul and the rest). As Mr. Schweizer cynically observes, anymore the purpose of government seems to be to enrich those who populate it. Congress is structured into committees, tiers and hierarchy as much for control of the members as for organizational propriety. Yet it is all very Ecclesiastes: there is nothing new under the sun.

So, again, what to do? If bad government is as old as the world, what do we do? Maybe the best we can do is simply to do our best. Vote for people who represent what you believe in, or at least ones who seem to represent it. Speak up. Get involved. Write, blog, email, phone call, debate, get informed. And keep the people in government honest. Don't let the so & so's run amok with the power we entrust them. Insist on honesty and don't let 'them' get away with institutionalizing poor integrity any longer. No matter who you vote for, that seems like a Godly and proper thing to do. In looking through God's prism, maybe we do throw them all out after all. Or maybe not.

Whatever we do, believe that better days are ahead. Our country, indeed our world, is in hard times. Some of the greatest crises since the Second World War are upon us and there seems to be a glaring lack of leadership in all circles political. Change is coming for sure, and some of it will be tough. And yet, I believe better days are ahead of us and not just in our eternal destination. We are members of God's kingdom here and now, so we don't have to put up with all the bad actors who call themselves our public servants. Victory over tyranny is ahead. Lower unemployment, better jobs, more plentiful food, prosperous times, and days of glory are still ahead. We have the power to insist on better, to right the wrongs that have happened, and to improve. 'The king' won't do it. By nature, the king is corrupt. But with the faith and talent God gives us, you and I can. All these temporal things won't matter in eternity: they are only worries of the moment and, as such, in the long run will be irrelevant. The 'king' here does indeed profit from the 'fields' that you and I work. The King of all eternity profits as well when we set our hearts on where and how He leads us through our meaningless work here and, in doing so, buys back our labor and turns it into something worthwhile. That's a government I will never want to throw out!

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 July 2012

Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 10.

Isn't this the truth? I mean, some verses seem to have obscure meaning, and some are hard to figure out, and some don't really seem to translate easily into our lives even as I know they have meaning I need to comprehend. Not so this one.

We live in an era of immense wealth. And even though the worldwide economy is in worse shape than it has been in 80 years, the amount of wealth in the world is still staggering. Late last year, I spent time in Michigan, leading a project in Flint. If you haven't been there lately (or at all) eastern and central Michigan – the old industrial area – is severely depressed. Last week my son returned from a mission trip there and he confirmed my observation: that the Detroit area is in pretty desperate straits. Whole neighborhoods are abandoned. Factories are shuttered. Sketchy characters wait on sidewalks for something to happen. My impression was that it's a hope-challenged area; I think my boy would agree.

Jobs and businesses move out leaving real people with real lives behind. Just as the government can oppress us, so can business and commerce. When that commerce dries up, real people – you and me – are affected. What's that political line? Recession is when your neighbor loses his job and depression is when you lose yours. I've been unemployed several times and it's tough, and there's the temptation to say that 'those rich guys just screw the little guys and all they care about is money.'

Shame on you if you believe that. Who are you or I to judge someone else's heart? Even in areas like the Rust Belt, I wholeheartedly reject the arguments of people who pit the classes against each other. It seems to me their arguments start out with a genuine complaint yet usually degenerate into little more than coveting envy. It is no doubt that, especially in this economy, the wealthy seem much more insulated from wealth-based pain than those of us who aren't wealthy. Where in that truth are you or I given the right to judge someone else? If someone is an upstanding faithful person who acquires wealth, then I want to know how to do it because I could use some advice on making better financial choices. I dream about that house by the lake, or a nice car, or just being able to pay my bills on the first and fifteenth without feeling like a circus juggler.

Here's where my interest wanes: if having that wealth endangers my faith in God, then I'll be content to stay in the struggling middle class where I've always lived. There's the canard (based on a Bible verse) about the love of money being the root of all evil. That's an extension of this much earlier verse from Ecclesiastes. Money itself is just a tool, a resource. On it's own, it is meaningless. Obsessing about it, focusing on it, centering my life around its acquisition and multiplication are things I disdain. That's not just a healthy practice for me: it's what this verse is talking about. If your heart is set on money – indeed, if your heart is set anywhere but on Him – then your heart is set on wrong.

What happens if we replace 'money' and 'wealth' with God? Do that and read the first part of the verse again. In a way, though, even that last part holds true because if we love God but don't do what He asks, then our love is shallow and cold; meaningless. Whoever loves God finds they can't get enough. It isn't an unsatisfying craving: it's seeing how empty you are and how He fills you up, and knowing you want to share it. It is that if you love God, you aren't satisfied with your income because you get to see how shallow money is compared to living in the Lord. It's not enough to just say we love God. For that love to be effective, we need to let Him move us, do something small or large with it.

Yet before we go all revival here, let's heed again that prudent caution: love with a humble heart. Having faith doesn't mean that your money woes will be over. Living in faith doesn't mean that you'll immediately be on easy street. Having abiding faith does mean that you gain perspective, how small or large wealth is a gift from Him that we are to use responsibly and generously. Having faith helps you learn what real wealth is.

You and I are those sketchy characters too. We're waiting on something to happen in our lives. I'm getting older because I look at videos from today's popular singers and see little more than hedonism, material obsession with money, the trappings of wealth, and looking cool for the ladies; let's not explore the misogynistic side today. I've always admired people who know how to invest and turn little into much. It's a talent that I have yet to master. Like Forrest Gump, I'm not a smart man...but I know what love is. I know how to love. I can love fully. My other talents include keeping a tidy yard, a green thumb, (as of last night) fixing broken cars, managing deficient projects, and restoring order from chaos. And I love the people in my life. Is it much different to build focused wealth from disorderly financial chaos? I'm betting not. If you have that talent, I admire you and would love to learn how you do it. Here, then, is to hoping you and I learn instead how to use the talents God gave each of us for His glory and our betterment at the same time, building real wealth that is more than just numbers on a balance sheet.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 31 July 2012

As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? Ecclesiastes 5, verse 11.

Yesterday's verse talked about how wealth is meaningless, how acquiring it and loving money are meaningless. Today's has a two-fold lesson in it, something for those acquiring that wealth (you and I) and something about those who consume that wealth (also you and I). Tomorrow we'll talk about the emotional burden of wealth.

Not before discussing those two lessons, however. I suppose that you can read this verse as an observation about the basics of capitalism. Offer a good product or service and your customer base will increase. Make something that people want and you'll prosper. If you build it, they will come. No matter how you slice it, the basics of supply and demand are still the driving force behind all economies. They always have been as long as people have had desires and ways to pay for them. If you have something that people want, generally your product will become known. Sure you, have to take the initiative, market it, work hard, find your niche. God doesn't promise prosperity: He promises His abiding love.

Yet there's also another stark fact about capitalism: it can be ruthless. Most new restaurants fail within a year. There used to be a Louisiana chicken place over near the FC Dallas soccer stadium. I went in there a few months ago because it had just opened and I wanted to see what it looked like. What it looked like was yummy, and I stored the place away in my noggin for soon-to-be-used future reference. Last week, when I was interested in stopping there, I saw it is already out of business. Especially in a minor depression, the market can be ruthless, and my heart goes out to those who work so hard yet still can't make a go of it. God bless them for at least trying.

Let's say your new business succeeds. If your self-concept, your soul, your being is built around generating wealth, what will you do when hard times come and your customer base has to tighten its belt? What good will it do you when Wal Mart comes to town and threatens your bottom line? And even if you are prospering – even if you're fabulously wealthy – what about you? How much time do you get to spend with your family, or with your God, or even with yourself? When you're gone, who will get your business and your wealth? If you take time away, will your business wane? Do you have the tiger by the tail or does the tiger have you?

In church this Sunday, my friend, Mark, talked about a 5-minute habit that he and his group of bicyclists got into during their recent mission trip to Michigan. Each day, the individuals on the trip would take 5 minutes of silent, private time to re-energize with God, just listening and clearing their minds of all the daily clutter. Mark challenged each of us to do the same, and let me tell you that it isn't an easy habit to start, but I believe in what he said so I'm giving it a go.

If your business in life is just business, how much time do you have for the important business that is your soul?

That's what this verse today is really asking me. It's posing a rhetorical question about how meaningless wealth can be all the more meaningless because it is fleeting and deceptive. The old adage is true (explaining why it has staying power): money can't buy you happiness. That's how God designed it: money is a tool for us. Lasting happiness can only be found in God. Money can pay off your bills, but chances are you may just rise to the level of your newly reacquired wealth. Money can pay to dig a well in Africa but it can't make the people there happy. Money can buy you a new house at the lake but what good is it if that place becomes a hiding place instead of a refuge for rest? See what I mean?

So let's do the same thing we did yesterday and try a little substitution to see if it doesn't shed some light on what is being implied. Try this on for size: As God's love increases, so do those who consume it. And what benefit is it to the owner except to feast his eyes on God? If the entire book of Ecclesiastes was written to

poetically demonstrate how everything in this world is meaningless without God, then putting Him back into the verses as the object of each one fully makes the point. When you dive into God's Word, the more you open your heart to it the more it feeds you with a righteous, satisfying hunger. Yes, that sounds a little crazy, but it's true! The more you're in it, the more satisfied you become yet the hungrier you are for more of Him. It's the only addiction I know of that is healthy.

What benefit is it to you? Do you want to live forever, free of guilt for bad things you've done? It's something to build your life on, including your business.

But let's not confuse things here: I don't believe God wants us to act ruthlessly towards each other. Prosperity gospel – if you believe you'll get rich – is a load of bunk, and God is neither capitalist nor socialist. God is above that nonsense. Will there be trading in the hereafter? I doubt it, because in relying on Him for everything, there would be no need. Still, I have no idea. Nobody does.

Yet I'm still a big believer in the free market. People of good faith ethically exercising their rights to produce goods and services is the single biggest producer of freedom that this world has ever known. Where people are free to believe and to pursue their talents, the pursuit of wealth has lifted more people out of poverty than any other system that mankind has devised. The last 300 years have proven that faith and capitalism successfully co-exist, and capitalism thrives in a place where faith is strong even as it doesn't discourage faith. Not so socialism, communism, fascism or any of the other 'ism's' that deny human dignity, liberty and faith. It's the yearning of the human spirit to be free, not controlled, and real freedom is found by first submitting all to God. I have plans, hopes and dreams of building something good. Here's to taking those to God and following where He leads me whatever the outcome. That's worth at least 5 minutes each day of listening to Him.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 2 August 2012

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 12.

Do you think 'the rich' worry more? That's a silly question, don't you think? I mean, they're rich! With all the clap-trap about "the 1%" and how that one percent stick it to everyone, do you think they worry? They don't have to worry about things like medical expenses, or teenagers using drugs, or where the next paycheck will come from (or if it will cover our bills). Or do they? You know what? Maybe we're deluding ourselves if we think that isn't the case. Even if many zeros follow a one before the decimal in your checkbook, I suspect things aren't that much different. Really? Really. I agree with this verse. In reality, it doesn't matter whether I agree or not: it simply is true.

We long for the simple life. While writing this I'm sitting in my mother's house in southeast Oklahoma. Her house is one of an 83 year old grandmother, full of memories, dust, heirlooms and clutter. If I look around, I see all kinds of things that I grew up with, and I see belongings from her upbringing as well. Many of her belongings talk about a simpler life. In the bedroom where I slept last night hangs a poem that used to hang in my grandmother's Minnesota home. I read it this morning, talking about 'my symphony.' Nearby are pictures of my grandparents and my great-grandmother who I never met. They all lived in times that were simpler, with older technology and fewer choices...or did they? My grandfather was a self-made man who made a substantial amount of money that allowed him a somewhat affluent lifestyle even as he couldn't ever be considered 'rich.' Yet he was much better off than his parents or his own 7 brothers and sisters.

If you visit my mom's house you know you aren't visiting the home of a 'rich' person. My ancestors were neither simple nor wealthy, yet the life they lived seems simpler to me. They didn't have kids who communicate impersonally via text and Facebook. They didn't struggle with rampant drug use, STD's, sky-high auto insurance, Teen Mom (and all her peers in every town in America), and the like. No, they didn't deal with those things. They dealt with world wars, high infant mortality rates, polio and tuberculosis, (what would to us be) third-world-like commonplace living conditions, insect swarms, slavery, and dying because it rained too much and flooded you out (like 10,000 people died in Communist China just last week). And in doing so, they had a much tighter, closer-knit family that was rich and wealthy in things that really matter.

I can only imagine what trouble we could get into if we had more money. I mean, if you get on the internet it wouldn't take much searching to find sex tapes of Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian. How would you like to have your private, intimate moments splashed all over the electronic media? Even if you derive some sick flavor of fame from it, that's something I wouldn't want to deal with. How would you like it if, as soon as you made it to the big leagues, competitors started coming out of the woodwork trying to knock you down to second place? How would you like it if people sued you just because you're rich and they thought they could get away with it?

I'm not rich; you'd think I would sleep better. I don't have to worry about the consequences of a business deal that may affect a thousand people and their jobs. I don't have to worry about whether or not my accountants did their work right, or if they're stealing from me, or if any inadvertent mistake might bring the IRS down on my head. I'm not wealthy so I don't have to think or plan for what upstart competitors are trying to do to gain the advantages I've gained. Since I'm not wealthy, I don't have to deal with the kinds of temptations that affluence lays at my doorstep. I'm only in the stage of doing a small business startup. I don't have to worry about the kinds of things my self-made grandfather worried about in his business sixty years ago and he did it without the benefit of the education I've had.

Maybe the verse is making a good point.

People are just people. Yet I think we fool ourselves if we think that those who are better off than us financially don't struggle with the same cares you and I do. Sure, some rich guy doesn't have to deal with the kind of worries I have; he probably wouldn't know what to do. What makes me think I'd know what to do with his kind

of worries? Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are far wealthier than I have ever been and both operate on a level with which I'm quite unfamiliar. Yet both are exemplary family men, devoted to the people they love. Both have things to worry about aside from the national security and power concerns for which they are both campaigning. I don't have to worry about the kinds of things they worry about just like they don't have my concerns.

Perhaps, like the verse insinuates, wealth is actually a burden. Perhaps the temptations that wealth affords are a greater burden than we allow ourselves to see. Sure, the pursuit of wealth thankfully drives our capitalist system, and in itself this can be a good thing. As I mentioned earlier (paraphrasing the centenarian Milton Friedman) the combined factors of Judeo-Christianity and western capitalist democracy have lifted more people out of hopeless poverty than any other system devised in the history of man. Our western systems, especially those in free America, have been a blessing to mankind and yet they can also be a burden. With wealth comes responsibility How have you, me, or Obama handled our responsibilities? Don't worry: it's ok if you don't answer.

I reject the concept of "you have to give back." If you 'have to' then it isn't a thing of the heart, and God doesn't want our obligations: He wants us to really give from our hearts. That includes our wealth, and did you know that, for various reasons, the wealthiest in America give a far higher portion of their wealth to charity than those of us still climbing the ladder? It's true despite what the 99% would have you believe. It is better to give than to be forced to give, to have one's resources taken or compelled away. The rich man has much to worry about, not the least of which the temptations that his (perhaps hard-earned) wealth present. After all, in talking about those temptations, Christ Himself said "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Game, set, match.

It's really ok if you don't think that rich people worry. I simply disagree with you, and I think the verse is on my side. I believe people needlessly worry no matter how much we make, and I'm not defending 'the rich.' When we heed the point that King Solomon was making, we would do well to find that we have nothing to worry about, that the worry itself is meaningless because God always provides.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 3 August 2012

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 13 and 14.

Yesterday we talked about how wealthy people worry like poor people. The concerns may be different, but they are concerns all the same. Who are you or I to judge someone else's heart?

Here are some of those worries. I like how the "ecclesiastor" (is there even such a word?) implies in this section that worry is evil. The wealthy person gets no sleep because there are worries on his mind and wolves at his door. This may or may not be a function of his actions, but it is a real possibility with his accumulated wealth. Face it: others want what we have. If you become wealthy, you become an object of envy whether your wealth is in dollars, friends, or faith. I think that, next to pride, envy is the sin that underlies all others. Manifesting that envy is worry which is really little more than a subtle form of idolatry. It's putting ourselves before God and others, making ourselves our object of adoration. "How will I" is petty evil. It feeds that envy and makes it something to beware.

But there are other sins listed in today's verses. Wealth is hoarded to the harm of its owner. Think of good old Mr. Scrooge, miserly counting his pennies at the counting house. If you could inject yourself into the story, would you think that the thought of all those mites and bits adding up to compounded interest kept the lonely old man warm before the ghosts showed up? Or think about the super-wealthy in the world today. A friend of mine posted that 5 members of the Walton family (who own Wal Mart) are collectively worth over \$100 billion (meaning they are worth more than the total value of over 40 million Americans combined). When one of the Waltons dies, will they be any different from one of the nameless forty million? How much of those billions will someone own when standing before God? Answer: no more than all the debts by the poor man standing next to him.

The verse is (I think) saying that having wealth opens us to the temptations that wealth affords. There's nothing wrong with having money, but there's everything wrong with having that money and letting it harden our hearts. You could take the opposite approach and say there's nothing wrong with living in poverty but there's everything wrong with letting it harden our hearts. Either one of those statements would be undeniably true, though I suspect you wouldn't find many people who would willingly choosing to live in poverty if another option is available. Still, the point is glaring: there really isn't much difference between the wealthy person and the poor person.

That's not what the verse is saying. The verse is specifically saying that wealth is a danger. If the book reserves comment on the condition of the poor, those comments aren't mentioned here. It is a sin to hoard wealth. Wealth is intended for human benefit, and it is a blessing from God, meant to be shared, to bless many instead of just one. My read on the verse is that not sharing is the danger involved in hoarding.

Then it talks about losing wealth. How ironic is it that the first verses talk about hoarding wealth, but then it talks about how devastating it would be to lose it. Is it just me or does that seem strange? Whether it is or isn't perhaps is moot. If you lose something, it is a shock. Think about losing a loved one out of the blue. Think about a fire. Think about losing your job. Just yesterday, two people collided while driving just off to my left. I saw them in my peripheral vision but heard the definitive SMACK when one car smashed into the other. I bet that was a shock to both drivers.

Think about how it would be to live your life in luxury, privilege and comfort, then to lose it. How did Job react to that when it happened? He mourned but assumed the most humble posture possible, wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes. Would you or I react in the same way if all we ever knew or relied upon suddenly went away? If you or I had great wealth one day and the next day it was gone, would we mourn or would we go into shock? I know what I think would happen. You'd have to pick me up off the floor. I like to think I would bounce back; don't we all? But I'll be honest: at first, I would be shocked. By my read of verse 14, that would be natural.

And if I lost it and had nothing to leave to my heirs? My father in law once lost everything he owned in a fire. In a way, I admire his outlook that the things he owns are simply things. True, nobody wants to live poorly or be poor stewards of their possessions (or their wealth). If you talked with him, I think he would proudly tell you that he wants to always take care of the things he owns, but if they all went away he could always start again. Things are just meaningless things.

If you had billions and all that went away and you had hoped, dreamed, and planned on leaving that to your kids, would you be able to live with such an outlook? According to the verse, the person of wealth living in all of its temptations and advantages would likely not. Is this a broad generalization? Of course it is. God forbid that it be proved true on anyone.

Such calamities are indeed grievous evil. God didn't intend that grief or evil be part of our lives. God created us for communion with Him. That eternal communion was supposed to be unimpeded by worries, and it was supposed to take the place of any wealth that the world had to offer. It's a tragedy when anyone loses something important to them, yet the tragedy is even more pronounced when someone living on high falls far. Here's to hoping that person is neither you nor I if it is anyone at all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 6 August 2012

Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 15.

Life is beautiful, you know, even though today's verse seems to say otherwise. You've heard this in your life many times before (and read it here just the other day): when we leave this life, we take nothing with us that we earned here. The billionaire and the 'slumdog' both stand before God with only themselves. There are no Armani suits at that time, no Rolls Royce, no garbage scraps, no plasma TVs, no college degrees. It is only you and your life standing before God and all of His magnificent eternity. We all know this.

One thing I like about reading Scripture is that it's very frank. Quite honestly, that's one of the reasons why I fail to understand why other people are turned off by it. I like to have the news straightforward; please don't dance around the facts or try to sugar-coat them. Scripture presents things plainly. I mean, 'naked' isn't a word that wastes much time. 'He takes nothing from his labor' pretty much says it all. I'm wordy, so I appreciate something brilliantly concise and well said. If I wrote for a hundred years, I couldn't say it better than what is said in this verse.

I think that's true because this is another one of those universal truths. Believers and atheists alike as well as the casually ignorant in our world can all understand this. An old friend of mine once displayed a sticker on her door that said "the one with the most toys wins." This verse disproves and slam-dunks that saying, as well as so much of our lives that centers around accumulating stuff. My house, my (broken down) cars, my dog, my movie collection, my new clothes, my dishes in the drainer by the sink, my overused laptop: when I die they'll still be here and it won't matter whether they are or they aren't.

Should we, therefore, be fatalistic? I mean, for God's sake, what's the point? We really can't have it both ways. Either the best this life has to offer is living it up, or the best this life has to offer isn't worth a hill of beans because it's all meaningless. If we're just growing worm food, what's the stinkin' point?

The point is that, even while this verse is oh so true, it indirectly points to real hope. The only thing that I carry with me into the next life is what spiritual meaning I lived in this life. If I reject the Savior in this life, I reject all He is and stands & stood for. That has eternal consequences. If I embrace the Savior in this life, then that too has eternal consequences and I know that He will embrace me as we journey into what comes after this place. I don't carry that in my hand, though I demonstrate it with my hands here and now. I carry it in my heart and speak from it. No matter where you or I find ourselves in our pursuit of 'stuff', we get to live this out, model it for the people around us, and let it change lives (including our own).

Knowing that, keep this verse in perspective as it relates to the ones that came before it. If you'll remember, verse 14 talked about hoarding and losing wealth, and verse 12 talked about how worry never seems to leave the wealthy. When I read today's verse, my mind automatically says "why worry?" Quite seriously, why worry because this verse jumps to what happens at the end of all our worries. God provides whether I worry or not; here's where I think of that verse in the book of Luke where Christ says "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these." He meant that there is natural beauty we can't create, and that it reflects God's own natural beauty. Even more, I think, He meant that God provides splendor even for the least of things and they don't worry about it yet He provides it anyway.

Personally, I think there's nothing more beautiful than the knowledge that I get to share in the beauty of this life – love of my family and friends, those western sunsets, laughing and good times, the peace of being in concert with my God – but that there is so much more beauty on its way. I came into this world owning nothing worldly and that is how I will exit this world no matter what I do. And when I do exit, all that wasn't beautiful in this

world – all that happened or I brought on myself – will be left behind and shed off as worthless. Like refined gold, I will be blameless in my Savior and get to move on to a new phase of living in which His divine loving beauty will be the new standard.

Naked you and I came here and naked of the spirit we will depart. Without getting racy, I think there's something beautiful in that. We came here unashamed and bare; when we live a life of faith, we get to depart the same way. That's something to look forward to.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 7 August 2012

This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 16 and 17.

Over the weekend, my mom reminded me of something that I had forgotten: a section of Ecclesiastes was read at my father's funeral. Specifically, she asked the minister to read from Ecclesiastes 3, the section about a time for all things under heaven. It would seem like a strange funeral verse, that there is a time for everything, even a time for dying. If you think back, I think you'd agree with (my mother and) me that it isn't strange at all. That section is poetic, perhaps the most poetic verses in all of Scripture. It's also comforting to know that all things have a time and all things occur in God's good time.

What about these verses today? They are far less comforting yet they still make a commentary about the timing of things. If you remember, yesterday's verse talked about how we enter and exit life naked, and it obliquely contrasted this with the fact that we don't get to take our possessions with us, but we do take the spiritual love that we've possessed in this life. Today, here's another oblique contrast.

Working for 'stuff' all your life is evil. I said not long ago that I am a big believer in capitalism and 'the market.' I believe in what the American Founding Fathers said about the pursuit of happiness. If you've never read up on the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of 'happiness' is NOT talking about an emotional condition. If your civics teacher taught that, I'm sorry: they failed you. 'The pursuit of happiness' that Mr. Jefferson wrote of was the pursuit of wealth, the pursuit of 'stuff.' He wrote that we should be free to pursue making the most out of our lives free from the interference of government (in the 1770s case, free from the British monarchy and a meddling Parliament). Our lives are the time and place for earning, for striving to be free, and this is a right and proper thing, even a Godly thing, for us to do.

If that's all you live for, then you are living for evil. No, this verse isn't inconsistent with that founding American tenet. The key is 'live for.' If all you live for is the pursuit of happiness, then you are living for a grievous evil. Don't be surprised when wealth, belongings, and possessions leave you feeling a bit hollow. Don't be shocked if you find that sleeping around, rock and roll all night (and partying every day) just wears you down and leaves you feeling cold, used. All the striving to find purpose in things (or even in just the striving) turns us cold and empty. Without something to believe in, an empty soul will fill itself with anger, depression, resentment, frustration, and even more striving for more.

In other words, it will do what the verses say.

You and I were made for more. If you really want to rock and roll all night, check out some inner peace in God. Strangely enough, here's where I think of Leo DiCaprio and his tuxedoed smirk on the Titanic: "so, do you wanna go to a real party?" I'm not here to tell you to not live for today. I think of another movie: The Color Purple. Whoopi Goldberg lives a harsh, terrible life of being used and abused when in breezes Oprah Winfrey. In response to suffering, Whoopi's character says "this life don't last forever." There is heaven beyond. The Oprah refuses to stand for that. She won't write off here and now, and insists that Whoopi stand up for herself. Before the tables turn later in the movie, don't lose sight of that fact. We ARE to live for here and now, and we are to live better, and we ARE to live for tomorrow as well. It's a 'both/and' type of situation.

If you want to rock and roll all night (and party every day...thank you Messers Stanley and Simmons) then live it up, it's your choice. If you want to do that and still live for something better, then submit yourself to God and watch what happens. It isn't some cure-all action, some get-rich-quick scheme that will take away all your problems. What that submission (and subsequent faith building) can do, though, is help you deal with the frustration, anger and affliction that would otherwise fill up your soul when the partying is over and the rock and roll silent. Have the faith that Miss Celie talked about – remembering that heaven awaits – but don't forget that we're part of heaven now, not just later. Try that one on for size.

Try it on because it's the only way there is to turn back the hopeless, grievous evil that walks with us every step of the way if we don't. When my mom asked to have Ecclesiastes 3 read at Dad's memorial, the minister did indeed tell her that it seemed like an odd verse to read at a time when people should seek spiritual comfort. I think that, in this case, she knew better. It is comforting to know there is a time for every purpose under heaven. The time to live is now.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 8 August 2012

Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. Ecclesiastes 5, verses 18 – 20.

Ecclesiastes 2 ends with verses like these. So does Ecclesiastes 3. The writer of the book wanted us to know that, absent eternity, the best anyone could hope for would be to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in what we do. There is much the world has to offer so if this is as good as it gets, enjoy it while you can. There are people in my life who 'get' this point. It's hard to sit idle and watch while people you care about dive deeply into all things partying. I guess this makes me one of the old fogies who is losing touch with his edgy side because I've lived this kind of life and walked away from it. Staying in it could have hurt much more than it actually did, but believe me: it hurt enough.

Please don't walk away thinking this is judgmental, though I did judge what I thought to be best for me. Still, even in the thick of my hardest days, the nagging question kept prodding me: have you had enough? Without faith, life could get pretty bad pretty fast. It doesn't take much to slide from "just one more" to "oh my God what happened?" How did I get here? Work is meaningless, riches are meaningless, pleasures are meaningless. The long and short of it is that everything is pretty much meaningless... unless... there's that all important conjunction: unless.

Solomon understood this; he penned it. He understood that life need never be as bad as it could be. That unspoken, implied 'unless' is what gives the verse deeper meaning than just an observation on the bling lifestyle. Unlike in chapters 2 and 3, Solomon ends this chapter with a hopeful lead-in to the next. That lead-in reminds us of contentment, even of an act of worship. When we enjoy the gifts we're given, we're enjoying gifts from God. In reality, everything is a gift from God whether it's the air in your lungs, the bed you slept on last night (unless you stayed out partying...), the job you just left or the computer on which you're now reading. Everything is a gift; we are but stewards of those gifts during our time on this rock. What matters is the ENJOYMENT of those gifts, and the verses remind us that enjoying something – appreciating, using, being thankful for, deriving honest pleasure from something – is acknowledging God's grace. God keeps us occupied with gladness in our hearts, and that gladness is a fruit of His Spirit. When we act thankfully, we're actually acting in worship.

Long and short: even in meaningless things, God is kind and gives.

That's good to remember, especially when we remember that, just as quickly as things can go wrong, so can they go right. Think about it: when you've had a really bad day, doesn't it take just a little bit of kindness to turn it around? A smile, a nice word, a kind gesture: don't they sometimes make all the difference in the world? Maybe the person who gives that gesture is thankful for the gifts in their lives. Perhaps they're paying it forward. Whether we realize it or not, spreading the milk of human kindness is sharing God's goodness with others. The hardest thing about living as a believer is actually doing it, but the easiest way to start is by simply being kind. That way, we get to take simply getting by with what we've got and let God transform it into appreciation for what & who we are, and then reflect that to others. It changes our outlook, our behavior, our attitude...our hearts.

Isn't that important in a world that seems determined to beat the crap out of us at every turn? Bills to pay, children using drugs, neighbors that argue, depression, government gone amok, wars abounding, road rage, petty squabbling: name your flavor of dysfunction and we see it every day. Isn't it important to beat these things back by living out kindness and thankfulness, working to see the good in things instead of all the negativity that's more than self-evident? Solomon thought so. I do to. I think that means I'm in good and wise company.

The other night, I watched "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo." What a desperately violent, provocative and edgy movie. I enjoyed it and found myself considering how the main character, Lisbet, was used and discarded by everyone in her life, how she was a victim who had inner resilience, something that kept her going. She was anything but a person of faith – she was the exact opposite in fact – but I see a parallel in that character and this concept. She kept going even through the worst life could dish out. In the end, even in disappointment, she became better. Life need not be hopeless, and even in the middle of hopelessness, if we let ourselves see it, there is hope and 'right' working to make itself known. And the hope, righteousness, and love are stronger than the hopelessness, even when we can't see how that is so.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 9 August 2012

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil. Ecclesiastes 6, verses 1 and 2.

Have you ever lost the girl (or the guy)? I mean, have you ever invested so much of yourself in a relationship only to see it fall apart and watch that special someone walk away and pursue happiness with somebody else? Or a job: have you ever done a job well, then had someone else take credit for it. Worse, have you ever had the fruit of that job taken away and handed to someone else? Just at the point when you're succeeding, "Joe" is given your project and you're moved on to something else. Or have you ever worked hard for a goal only to find that it didn't really satisfy you? Maybe you're at a celebration for something good you did (or that was done) and while others are reveling, you're feeling kind of empty? Or what about your bank account? Have you ever saved for something, had a goal, and gotten close to it only to realize that something else takes priority and something else must now 'enjoy' the profits of your savings? To me, this is pretty common when you're raising teenagers.

Been there done that; haven't we all? In a world at war with itself it may indeed seem that the best we can expect is to eat, drink and be merry. But those things can leave us feeling hollow. We strive, we earn, we struggle, we work our butts off and just at the time when we should appreciate these things...we don't. It's not that we don't want to: it's that we don't. "I keep looking." That's a Sara Evans song in which she sings "every time I get what I want I get unsatisfied."

Sound familiar?

It could be my life's story. To be frank, it almost seems like a cruel joke, like God is laughing at me. To be even more frank, it makes me understand where people are coming from when they think God is set against them. He blesses us with talent and we use it and we succeed. He answers our prayers; we get what we want; our wishes are granted; our dreams come true. Couch it any way you like: at the height of success we find that it isn't enough. Just like Ms Evans, when we get what we want we get unsatisfied.

Maybe the underlying issue is us. If you re-read that last paragraph it's full of "we," "our" and me. I think that means we're on to something. It means we've fallen for the deception and God doesn't deceive.

The way I read these verses that start chapter six, they are an acknowledgement that our success comes from God but that our dissatisfaction doesn't. Mind you, there is something that can be healthy about always striving to do better, to always seek better quality even in our best accomplishments. Analyzing room for improvement is a productive exercise. The more you do it, the more you see that we are all imperfect and we can all always do better. The trick in doing it successfully, however, is to not focus on us as being the goal. If we're striving to improve, then identify what needs to be improved and why. Do so for the larger good, for the good of the whole. Better than that, do so for somebody else, to improve someone else's lot, someone else's outcome. And even better than this, strive for improvement and excellence because it's for God.

Perhaps when we realize that 'we' are the focus it then becomes a good time for Psalm 46: be still and know that I am God. The way to turn the focus away from me is to step back, focus on Him, and find your center that way. He is always talking; He is always transmitting even when we don't see or hear it. Even the moments when He is seemingly silent are a message. The trick is learning how to recognize and decipher those, and that always starts with being still. Take self and transform it with selflessness. That's what God did for us.

The way to beat back the grievous evil of dissatisfaction? Be still and know that He is God. In my experience, it's also the only way to handle those situations when you lose the girl, lose the credit, find your goals are hollow, or your bank account empty. What the verse says is true in that these things can be a grievous evil, one that keeps us up at night. I wonder if it isn't also the reason why you find both rich and poor equally

dissatisfied. The way around that is to go through God. Be still, be quiet for a little while, and just listen. He will let you know the right way to move forward in His good and proper time.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 10 August 2012

A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man— even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place? Ecclesiastes 6, verses 3 – 6.

This is a pretty bleak picture, don't you think? I mean, comparing the life of a hopeless but long-lived man to the never-life of a stillborn child? A stillborn child is a tragedy, a promise not realized, a life cut short, a reason for terrible grief and unquenchable sadness. It's that bad? Really? Really.

Again, to me it's another example of the frank beauty of Scripture. 'The Good Book' deals with tough issues in life, and it does so in ways that cut to the chase. These verses continue the train of thought that not enjoying one's gifts from God is a grievous evil. It doesn't say "oh, that's a crying shame." It says EVIL. Evil as in Hitler-type evil, as in Osama-type evil, as in wacko-shooter-at-a-Batman-movie evil. These verses compare not enjoying prosperity to things so unspeakably evil that they reside on the terrifying fringe of sane humanity.

What's more, something that is dead is better than the evil. According to verses 3 through 6, something that is dead is better than something that is prosperous yet unsatisfied. Unsatisfied? Isn't that kind of a low standard, a low threshold? Doesn't the bar seem set a little low? I would be better to be dead than to live well and not enjoy it? Dissatisfaction equates with the Holocaust? Really? Really.

Do you think that's extreme? I mean, in our US of A easygoing twenty first century English, do these words seem way too edgy? Our politicians today will stoop to any level, do anything including discrediting their offices or breaking the laws they are supposed to uphold just to win and we're preferring death over dissatisfaction? Our television isn't in the gutter because the gutter is too good for it and we're using these extreme words? We casually ignore real famine, real tragedy, real suffering in the world everywhere but where we are and we're talking about preferring oblivion to not liking what we've got? Really? Really.

Really indeed.

I think back to Bible study at our old church in Colorado. A retired pastor belonged to that church, and I remember one day that he was practically exhorting how God looked at even our best deeds as filthy rags. He was quoting Isaiah 64: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." Even the very best we can do, absent God, is trash, disgusting, repulsive to a holy God. It isn't that God wants to look at us and our actions this way. He has no choice when we're tainted with the stains of our sins, our wrongs. All the junk we think, say and do messes us up in ways that we simply can't fix alone and can never bleach clean.

And even this is better than someone who doesn't enjoy when they've got it good.

Here's the twist: We ALL always have it good. Even in the worst days, even when things are so tough and we're really up against the wall we still have it good. Compared to the beggars who sift through the trash in Africa, I live like a king. I took a mission trip there last year and purposefully left behind my used clothes when I left. They were filthy and well-used, and I preferred to leave them with the trash rather than dirty my suitcase by bringing them home. Sure enough, they went to the dumpster behind the hotel. Most likely, by the end of the day, they had escaped the dumpster and became the belongings of a beggar who didn't have any better.

Believe it or not, the beggar has it better than the one who was never born, and the one who was never born has it better than the one who lives a long, healthy life but is not satisfied.

What brings satisfaction? You know the answer. Is it any wonder, then, that without the satisfaction He gives, there can be only grievous evil? God is holy and intends for us to be holy so we can live in communion with Him. It's a pure love thing. When we couldn't do that on our own, He gave of Himself to fix it. He did that because not doing it would leave even the richest, most temporally righteous man living in unspeakable evil. When we don't stop what we're doing to be thankful for what He has given us, we're letting ourselves be dragged back into our sin. Sin is separation from God: ANYTHING that separates us from God. And because God is holy, anything that takes us away from that is unholy.

You know: evil. Really? Really.

Really, really even though the words can seem extreme to those of us who live in a world that we fancy to be civilized. Without God, even the best that there is of this world isn't as good as the unfulfilled promise of a dead child that was never born to live. It isn't extreme hyperbole. It's just the way things are.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 August 2012

All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. Ecclesiastes 6, verse 7.

What fills you up? I'm trying to lose some weight. Throughout the first half of my life, I was a really thin guy. In fact, when I entered the Air Force in 1985, I was at my weight MINIMUM of 118 pounds. It wasn't that I was sickly, though I was weak: I was simply thin. I always had been even though my appetite never suffered. These days, I'm trying to lose weight. My frame isn't huge; I'm not obese, and I reject those government weight standards that seem to lay guilt on us for the way we look. Carrying around extra weight saps my energy, though, and I don't like the way I look. That and I don't want to end up diabetic. Consequently, I'm watching what I eat, reducing what I drink and not drinking alcohol during the week anymore, and changing my physical activity. Food fills me up, but when my body stores it wrong, it isn't always a healthy thing.

Sometimes I try to fill up my life with habits. Cleaning up around the house, writing these words, my movie collection, never ending yard repairs, and a litany of other reasons: all of them ask for my time. Usually, I give in to them. I like days when I get a lot of things done; it's a satisfying thing to look back on many jobs accomplished. The thing about them that leaves me a little cold, though, is that there are always more. Fold the laundry and there will be more laundry to do. Washed dishes don't stay clean forever. There's always another TV show I'd like to watch. The words can always demand more of me. I think you get the picture, and I think you know why that is.

Pride also fills me up and this is a dangerous thing. Last week, I was flying home from Minnesota. It's no secret that I feel annoyed at the security inconveniences posed by the TSA. One of those annoyances was on display last Saturday. While in line at the scanner machines, the agents (rightfully) made two people wearing ball caps take them off before entering the machine. Those are the rules and they're designed to minimize where people could hide weapons. Immediately afterwards, however, a man walked through the machine wearing a turban and the agents did nothing. It made me mad; either the standards should be equally applied or they shouldn't. When I got through security, I pulled the TSA agent aside and grilled him. Why did you rightfully make those people take off their hats but not the man wearing the turban? The agent responded by saying "it's his religious right to wear what he likes" and I responded "what if it's my religion? Will you make me take it off?" His response: a snarky "I'll bet it's your religion." As my blood started to boil and I contemplated smarting back at this over-empowered smart aleck, I simply walked away and got mad. I had a flight to board and it didn't seem worth the extra trouble (and likely full body search) that would ensue. In other words, I gave in.

Why did I start the fight? Was it a moment of heroic civic pride? Was I making a point for the benefit of untold others? My friend, I wish I could say it was such a moment. The truth is that I wanted to stir the pot a little. The way the agent wrongfully applied the rules made me mad and I wanted to make a point not really to fix the problem but instead to simply puff myself up. That's pride. Telling you about it now, I'm ashamed. It was right to point out that the agent was mis-applying the rules (and endangering others). I should have done so in respect and determined love. Instead, I botched the moment and just made an idiot out of myself.

I'm not going to use these words to cite reason after reason as to why you should tank up on God's word. The reasons are valid and I respect your intelligence to check them out and decide for yourself. If you don't know where to start, try the New Testament book of Hebrews. Or, even better, read the words in red in one of the four Gospels. Go to the source yourself and open your mind, then see what happens.

That's a good recommendation because it works; glory to God for it, not to me or anyone else. A few weeks ago, my friend, Patrick, challenged his congregation to spend more time in the Word, at least a half hour per day. Not long afterwards, my friend, Mark, also challenged the congregation to spend 5 minutes per day simply listening to God, being with Him and letting Him speak. I'm living proof that those things really do work. God works on us, changing us from within, our motivations, our thoughts, our patterns, our willpower, our choices, our attitude and our hearts. All these and more are affected by how He works on us when we spend time reading up on His Word, talking with Him about it, and simply being still to listen for how He is going to move us in each moment.

I'm finding that, in each moment, when I'm full on God I'm hungry for more but satisfied with my hungers of the world. Have my many bills disappeared since this started? Nope. Have all temptations flown from my door? Nope. Do I still have to walk through 'the naked scanner' at the airport, have all troubles stopped, days gotten easier, stresses ended, or reasons to get angry gone away? No, on all accounts. What is changing, however, is how I look at all those things. Even when I mess up (like I did at airport security), rather than dwelling on it I get the privilege of taking those cares to God and having Him point things out to me. The next step is then to let Him tell me of better ways, then going forward to do them.

A few days ago, the Ecclesiastes verses talked about how it would be better for someone to have never been born than to live life and not enjoy it. Since this entire Book contrasts our human side with our need for God, I believe this verse is a small explanation of just why that is. Filling up on anything other than God still leaves you hungry, unsatisfied, always wanting more, craving more. What's more, when you incorporate it in your life, you never have to diet on it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 14 August 2012.

What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? Ecclesiastes 6, verse 8.

This is probably going to be the weirdest comparison I have ever made but, you know, sometimes it simply works. Strange as it will initially sound, I can think of no better (or more timely) analogy for today's Ecclesiastical verse.

Last night's entertainment at Chez Terry was "The Full Monty." If you have never seen it, the film is a 1997 English movie about six unemployed Sheffield steelworkers who decide to earn some money by stripping. The main character sees a bunch of women standing outside a Chippendale dancing show and decides the locals can do even better because they'd be willing to go all the way or, in a colloquial term, go 'the full monty.'

I'll pause while you get that 'what the heck is Dave thinking' thought cleared out of your head. Trust me: we're going someplace with this.

Ok, let's get a few things on the table. The movie is a comedy but, as you might imagine, there are some heavier undertones. Contained in the movie are many, many profane words, themes about suicide, depression, homosexuality, vice and the consequences of divorce and economic calamity. The movie is actually a story, though, of fall and redemption, of regaining confidence by going out on a limb. It's a story about regaining one's dignity after living through some pretty hard times, yes, even regaining one's dignity by going all the way naked in front of a crowd of 400 screaming Yorkshire women.

What advantage has a wise man over a fool and what does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others (especially when the plot revolves around nude dancing)? Ask the six guys who stripped in the movie. Better yet, ask me.

After all, I've made a fool of myself plenty of times. Ask many people who know me and they'll probably tell you that if you are looking for somebody to 'go there,' he's usually me. I was voted class clown of my graduating class. Yes, I have gone streaking. There are bars all over four continents that have seen me in rare form. I'm the guy who has stepped out, over-spoken, performed audaciously, and gone over the top more times than I can even count now. I've been known to make a fool of myself. I write these things with a Cheshire cat grin on my face because some of them were fun memories. Some are bittersweet, and some still bring hurt.

Most, however, leave me feeling like a fool. It's hard to take a fool seriously, especially one who is willing to go 'the full monty' for no good reason. At least the guys in the movie had a reason: I wish I could say I was as noble. In a twisted sort of way, I see that one of the reasons why I've done some of the crazy things I've done is because, like yesterday's verse said, I've been unsatisfied. What fills me up? Praise, the spotlight, the center of attention, adulation: there's never enough stage for me to stand on. Though some of my most successful moments at work or at home have been when I've worked behind the scenes, I adore the spotlight and adore the sound of applause. I adore the feeling of being in control, of feeling important, of feeling valued and needed.

If you are like that and you aren't careful, you may be walking around in the full monty and not even realize it. Pride goeth before the fall, or so the verse once said. People can see through veneer and that emperor's new clothes really do leave him naked. What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? Perhaps the better question would be 'does the poor man know he's bringing shame on God when he doesn't conduct himself well?'

Yep. That's me. Full monty out in public and when I stopped to look at the audience I found out nobody was paying attention and the bar was actually a seedy dive. Fool. If you want to see the fool on stage dancing

naked beside me, stop to take a look in that mirror stage left. I mean, my foolishness is pretty bad. How does yours look?

For us, just like the naked guys in the movie last night, there is dignity to be found by knowing how to conduct one's self. The unemployed men in the movie found their self-respect again by doing something totally outrageous. I think there's another way too, and it's equally outrageous.

Have a little faith.

To our world, believing in this supernatural, all-loving, all-forgiving Savior God is outrageous, illogical, and dangerous. We go against the grain when we get down with the Almighty. In the eyes of the audience that is looking for a good time distraction, we are the ones who have lost our minds and gone outrageous. But think about it. If you want to let go of your problems, you have to lay them out bare. If you want to start over, sometimes you need to get back to basics. If you want to be trustworthy, honest, and able, sometimes you have to be exposed. In all these things, you're going to God to bare your soul, to get back to the basics of love and life, and to expose your innermost self. We take nothing with us when we die, we are as naked as when we are born. Why not expose ourselves to him while we're living, while there's still time to make a change? When we do that, He restores. He always restores. When we do that, we are like the wise man observing the fool we once were.

Standing naked on stage never felt so good. The audience isn't laughing. they're cheering.

If you live near by me in North Texas and you haven't seen the movie, feel free to hit me up and borrow it. My wife, son, mother and I all sat watching the movie and we really enjoyed ourselves. We needed the laugh, and we needed the enjoyment. Please understand: I have ZERO desire to parade naked around the house, the neighborhood, or at Johnny's Icehouse pub down the street. But if that's what it takes, then that's what it takes. It took much more to buy me and you back from things much worse than overcoming simple shame.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 15 August 2012

Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 6, verse 9.

I struggle with this concept a lot. Is it a sin to look at a pretty lady and think she's pretty? Or to see something you'd like to have, say a fancy car or a nice piece of jewelry for your wife? I like to go to Cabela's to browse for a new boat, fishing tackle, maybe a new 12 gauge or camping equipment. Is that wrong? Where exactly is that fine line between healthy desire and genuine coveting? Man, I really hate that the right answer is "it depends." I prefer black and white answers but this just isn't one, mainly because this is another proverb, another good saying that means more than it says.

I know, I know: what's a sin to one person isn't a sin to someone else. We aren't talking about areas of judgment: we're talking about thresholds. We are talking about pain points. Sure, some sins are black and white; we kill, we cheat, we lie, we steal and so on. Add into those the heart that conceives them. Murder, adultery, lying, theft and all sins: they start in the heart. One person can look at the ladies all day long and not be tempted by them, but get him in a room full of slot machines and he's hooked. One woman can go shopping until the cows come home, but her friend is addicted to covering her insecurities in credit cards. What trips your trigger might not trip mine and vice versa. It sometimes makes me admire Jimmy Carter, who confessed to lust in his heart yet never strayed from Ms. Rosalynn. Then again, he admitted this to Playboy.

But no matter what fires you, the writer of today's verse says it is better to look than touch, to glance over rather than dive deep. Do I hear a big 'duh' in this? Absolutely, yet it's a profound point and one that shouldn't be brushed over.

Yesterday we talked about exposing ourselves, laying ourselves and our sins bare before God, going 'the full monty.' You can't confess your adultery without digging deep to ask yourself why you did it. You can't give up the booze without understanding what drives you to drink. You can't stop stealing until you understand what gives you the itch. Whatever sins plague you, they will still plague you until you lay them bare and face them, accept them, and begin to overcome.

And once you've done that, it's still a fact that you can't do anything about it to save your soul. Confessing our wrongs to God and understanding what caused them is a first important step. Neither you nor I can do the rest on our own. Whatever you try will be meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Only Christ Himself, the direct answer of he who wrote the verse, can do that. It's beyond your skill and mine and that's just the way it is. When I was deep in the middle of my indiscretions I was despondent, at the end of my rope. A friend of mine reminded me of this simple truth, reminding me that only one man in all of history ever died for everyone else's wrongs and that man wasn't me. My friend's kind encouragement helped me to face up and 'fess up, to face the things I had done and own them. The rest involved laying them down at the Cross and walking away.

Since then, I'd be lying if I told you I was an angel, or that I never told a white lie to save my kids' feelings, or that I never had too much to drink when I thought the night was too tough to face otherwise. I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't sometimes let wrong get the best of right, or my old guilt try to creep back in and take a foothold. When those times happen, it helps to remember that it's better to look than to look and jump. For me, the fine line is at the flirt, and when that can happen it's time to move along. Even more, if the moment is something that is tempting perhaps it's best to not look at all. In those moments, it helps to cover them in prayer, to speak up and talk with God. I suppose I must look like an idiot sometimes, driving down the road, looking like I'm talking to someone when nobody else is in the car. If you see me do that, you might just see me praying. More and more, I find I need to do that because more and more I find it to be a great comfort.

It's comforting because I'm human and I still struggle. You don't have to swear like a sailor to be bothered by the words that come out of your mouth. You don't have to cheat on your spouse to understand in your mind how that can happen. You don't have to steal or skip payments or neglect your responsibilities to find yourself

wanting more than what you've got. Hitler, Osama, you and me all have our sins. When you're faced with yours like I'm faced with mine, it's better, then, to know that all is forgiven by one better than us when we take those open wounds to the one who heals with eternal love.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 16 August 2012

Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he. Ecclesiastes 6, verse 10.

“He’s got the WHOOOOLLLLL world in His hands.” Admit it: that worked. The tagline to that song is now running through your head. On a Thursday, that’s not such a bad thing. That kid’s church camp hymn is a good reminder that all things are under God’s dominion. Even the bad things He allows to happen are under His control. He lets them shape us as surely as He lets the good things shape us, and all throughout our trials with the bad He is there to encourage and help us choose a better way.

That’s good to know because the evil that plagues you is nothing new. It’s been around as far back as Eden. I sometimes wonder if many of the things that we explain away today are little more than the petty demonic evils that are described in Scripture from thousands of years ago. Was Mao any different from any other tyrant who starved people to death in Assyria? Herod put to death every two year old boy in Judea while trying to murder the Messiah; is that so different from Hitler’s henchmen shoving little kids into gas chambers? The demons that plagued the man in the cemetery were legion and they drowned a herd of pigs. Where did they go after that? Did they just disappear or did they go elsewhere? Is mental illness really an illness or are some forms of it actually demonic?

Good or bad, what we know today has been around for millennia. No, there haven’t been iPhones, satellite TV, indoor plumbing, and rawhide dog bone chew toys for millennia, but the forces that drove creating them – ingenuity, perseverance, intelligence, drive – have been because they’re gifts from God. Each generation does something new with them. The forces that oppose us – i.e. ‘evil’ – have been around at least as long. We don’t know when the angels fell from grace, only that Lucifer and the rest with him did. Sometime before Eve was tempted in the Garden, evil came to be.

Since then, the branding has changed, the appearance has changed, the methods of delivery have changed, and much of what really turns out to be superficial veneer has changed, but the real substance of evil – and good – has not really changed at all. Good is still good and evil is still evil. Adam named all the animals brought to him; we still go by those names (meaning that you now know who to blame for names like ‘emu’ and ‘cow’).

I think this kind of millennial consistency is good to remember, especially in the context of today’s verse coming after yesterday’s (which said ‘better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite’ and that this is meaningless without God). It’s better to look than to touch because there has always been good but there has also always been evil. Without God, the good is difficult to know; with God, the evil is impossible to ignore. In a world where things change so quickly and where new technology seems to drive impossibly new and complicated choices, it’s comforting to know that, when you boil it all down, what always has been still is.

After all, God said His name was “I AM.” Not “my name is X” or “you can call me “Y” but He simply is. We are simply to call Him because He is. Always has been, is today, always will be. That’s both His name and His essence.

So what about that second half of the verse? Is this a way of saying ‘don’t get too big for your britches?’ Perhaps it is. You could also look at it as another way of saying ‘don’t rock the boat’ or ‘don’t fight the Man because the Man is bigger than you.’ We’re independent people living with and working with that good and evil that have existed for as long as we have. Who are you or me to contend with God? That is, who are you or me to tell God, well, anything? He’s God and we aren’t. I think it helps to think of this part in the context of Job. If you aren’t familiar with the story (from the Book of Job), Job was a wealthy man who was used by God to demonstrate His glory. Satan asked God for permission to ruin Job to demonstrate how even the most upright of men would turn away from God when the going got tough.

After having his family, his wealth, even his health and everything he knew taken away, Job tried and tried to remain true to his faith. Eventually, though, Job came before God and simply wanted to know 'why.' God's response? Who are you to ask me why? I created you as I created everything. What's more, I created you to be special. Who is any man to ask me to justify? I justify because I'm God and it isn't for you to say yes or no to that.

Um, what's different about you or me? Yeah, that's what I thought. Speaking for myself, I think I would have broken a lot sooner than Job did. When bad things happen to me, I want to know much sooner than Job did why they do. But no man like me can contend with a God who is much stronger in spirit, love, intelligence and devotion than I am. God can control good and evil because He created all that is. I can't do that; neither can you. There's comfort in knowing that, especially when we consider that the evil we face today has been around much longer than we have.

And yet, here in this post-modern world faced with so many challenges, He still has got the whole world in His hands. What is has been before we came on the scene and who are we to say any different?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 17 August 2012.

The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? Ecclesiastes 6, verse 11.

I'd like to write this as a birthday 'thank you' to my wife.

Husbands, if your wife is quiet it usually means she's thinking about something. No, this isn't a sexist statement and it isn't written to be incendiary. It's simply my observation that, generally, women have more to say than men. It could be that she's holding her fire to release it in full force; God help you then! Or it could be that she's better at thinking things through than we men are; I think that's more likely.

That's how it is with my wife. She is better than I am at watching her words. Our son is one of the more garrulous people we know; he's always full of words. "Dad, you know what" and "guess what" have always been lead-in's for a long conversation that usually follows. Some people have very few things to say, and some people have few things to say but many ways to say them. So it is with Dman.

I think he gets it from me.

I think he gets that from me because his mom is more reserved. She is much more measured and deliberate in using her words than either me or our boy. It isn't that she's unemotional, cold, distant, or unfeeling; NOTHING could be further from the truth. In fact, I don't think you'll find anyone with more real emotions, a warmer heart, and closer feelings than my honey. She's lived a life of up's and down's and has learned to master them and use them in service to things higher than just ourselves. It wasn't always so that she had little to say; it used to be that she could spend hours on the telephone, (I thought) not saying much in quite a few words. It turns out that I was very, very wrong. It turns out that my wife is a woman of strong words, deep meaning, and a faithful and loving heart. She saves her words now because she realizes they are important.

I admire that. You see, I've been a practicing believer for most of my life, with a background in strong mainstream denominational faith. I'm proud to say that I know much about Scriptures, that God has always been using that to move, teach, and instruct me in good ways even when I didn't recognize it. Her background was different, without the weekly Sunday faith that I once thought was as good as it gets.

In truth, I can't hold a candle to her. All my words and all my fancy talk are mostly meaningless compared to the very real and practical way she lives out her faith. Every day, she wakes up EARLY (because she has to be at work by 0600), gets ready for the day, and does a bible study. She's been doing this for months now, and it affects the way she looks at the world. God is shaping and molding her through His Word every day. Every morning (after her personal devotion) we have a couple's devotion together. We've been doing this for quite awhile now, all during the time we were struggling to get back together and now well beyond then. I strongly believe it's one of the fundamental tools God has used in our lives to weld us together as a couple, and it has happened because she led by example. For many years before this she wanted to do family devotions or couples devotions but I resisted because, when we tried, it was contrived and felt ordered by others. I look back now and see that she was right, and that my pride was one big thing that stood in the way.

Through all that time, she led by quiet example, saving her words and moving forward in small but very important ways.

In the context of verses this week that talk about how everything that has been still is, about how things may look better than they actually are if we reach out to touch, and how we're rarely satisfied by the world, I think it's great to end the week by stepping back to see how less is more and the wisest among us are the ones using the fewest words. And on her birthday, I'm thankful to sit here in our home and write a few words in the context of good Scripture that remind me of why I'm glad to be at her side. My wife inspires me through her strong, quiet dignity, through her determination and through the fact that she lives out what she believes.

Her job is hectic. She is a pre-school administration director who works longer hours than the people on her staff while getting paid less than what they do. We talk about this quite frequently, how it is her calling to work where she does, doing what she does. We talk about it because her job is quite stressful, and I sometimes think it seems like only force of will is holding things together there. The organization is understaffed, chronically short of teachers who game the system to maximize their own personal benefit, and her position often requires weekend work because she has to fill in 'on the floor' for other people who can't get their own work done on time. Such is the life of middle management.

And such is her calling. Through quiet witness and faithful determination, my lady serves. She doesn't just work where she does: she serves there. She impacts the children in their care, she impacts the staff working around her, she impacts the people above her who don't know the strong woman of Christian faith working in their midst but do know that someone of unusual talent and grace is part of their organization. Some people work as teachers, doctors, firemen, pastors, and missionaries; each of us has a calling we feel we must answer. Her work at this time is to serve in her position, quietly but patiently and professionally working to provide a solid pre-school education and superior, loving childcare to people who pay for quality service. Her work involves living a practical Christian witness through actions and all she does.

And she does it without wasting words.

Since today is her birthday, I'd like to recognize in front of some dear friends and dear readers that I'm thankful to be in this woman's life, to live each day at her side. Birthdays are special and they always should be, even when we grow up and people don't seem to recognize that as much. My wife knows that less is more in many cases, and that it's good, right and proper to pack much meaning into fewer words. That's a talent I admire, because I admire her and all she does. Happy birthday, Kimberly Anne. I think you're spectacular and wonderful, I love you, and I'm proud to celebrate this day with you.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 20 August 2012

For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? Ecclesiastes 6, verse 12.

And with that verse, another chapter is gone. With this short verse, another chapter flew by very quickly. Less than 2 weeks ago, we jumped into this chapter and now, at the start of a long work week, it's done. Mind if I ask just what the heck good it was?

Permit me a few minutes for a minor pity party. I'm kind of sick; it's a late summer cold and I've been hacking around the house for the last 5 days; could also be allergies. Really hurts to cough but there's nothing that can be done for it. I think you could say I'm no picnic to be around this week. My son's car is on the fritz again. The new (refurbished) water pump is, I think, bad again; I can't rule out that I didn't install it right when I did it a few weeks ago. I did the best I could – I've never done it before – but if you didn't do it right then the best you could do isn't good enough. The malfunctioning car has my son pretty upset, so he's no fun to be around; I guess I can't blame him. We are perennially tight on money this summer with many unforeseen expenses going out the door (like that water pump and wedding costs for our daughter and a hundred other small things). This has my overworked wife perennially upset and this just after her birthday this weekend. She had a good birthday, but wouldn't you know she had to go into work all day Saturday to get things done that couldn't be finished during the week. Last night, it all kind of blew up and we felt an angry squall blow through the house, complete with accusations, sullen hours of tense quiet, slamming doors and "you're no joyride right now either." Nice.

All this less happened than twenty four hours after we renewed our wedding vows. Saturday night, in front of a small group of friends, we renewed our vows, keeping a long-standing promise to promise once again to do better. It was a quickly arranged ceremony, and I didn't contact all of our distant family or friends. For some there simply wasn't time, but I also didn't want the surprise to leak out. It was great, but I could have planned it better and done a better job arranging things. A joyous occasion could have been even better if I had simply done more advance work in a short amount of time.

Sometimes I really just feel like giving up, like throwing in the damn towel and walking away and this immediately after pledging my undying love and partnership. After the really great 'highs' of Friday and Saturday, Sunday came due and it just went to pot. We started the afternoon by watching "The Hunger Games," which was a really uplifting family movie about teenagers slaughtering each other in post-Apocalyptic America. The dryer is busted, 3 of 3 cars in my house need some kind of major repair, I feel like crap, and I'm just DONE. Fiji is calling. Cut and run.

That's what the deceiver wants us to do.

The deceiver wants us to think that our days here are meaningless, that the best we can do is party it up on our birthdays, then return to the fatalistic days up against the wall. Those bills will never get paid off. One thing will get fixed but another will break. Keep thinking maybe you're sicker than you really are, or if you are sick that it's the worst you've ever felt (even when it really isn't). It doesn't matter if you pledged your undying faithful Christ-like love just the day before: go ahead and try to twist the knife a little more because, you know, they're wrong and you're right!

Our therapist, Dr. Kahle, told me not long ago "the nine hardest words in any relationship are 'I am sorry, I was wrong, please forgive me.'" Simply brilliant, don't you think?

Yes, King Solomon was building yet another contrast with which to end this quick chapter, pointing us once again to our constant need to live our lives in God's grace. Without His grace, without His love, our lives are meaningless and pointless. Days like yesterday are par for the course, and when the going gets tough...the tough get going. Cut and run, duck and cover, hit the road Jack. Party hard and live it up for now because you

never know when the party is going to end and who the heck knows what comes next? Since we don't know, who really gives a flip?

Yesterday morning, before the devil had his way in our house, we sat in a great service in church. We were basking in the good feeling of the night before, listening to our friend, Mark, preach about Barnabas and a living ministry of encouragement; Mark who had, just the night before, reunited us in matrimony. He said that we were made to love and encourage each other. Our purpose here isn't to get caught up in the small stuff or to squabble about minor things, or even to let the all-too-crafty deceiver goad us time and again. He's bigger than we are...but he isn't better. Our purpose is to give glory to God by sharing His love and growing it. Our purpose is to encourage each other to build bridges, mend fences, and be better for God by being better for each other.

In the end, God wins. If you want to know who wins the epic battle of the ages, it isn't the deceiver. He's really small potatoes. Until the end of time comes, like Meatloaf, we'll be praying for the end of time but, unlike Meatloaf, we'll do it by staying the course and trying again. God doesn't put bad things in our lives, but He does allow us to be confronted by obstacles, even tough and negative ones, so that we can learn to rely on Him even more. Relying on God, turning our lives over to Him: THAT is what we were made for.

It's what we were made for on a Monday starting a new work week when I'm still not feeling one hundred percent. The pre-school awaits my wife and I'll do my best to encourage her when it's tough just as she'll do her best to encourage me when a hundred small details crop up and vex me in my week. We'll both encourage our son as we work to get his lemon of a car fixed so that it's once again reliable. That may mean putting on yet another new water pump, but if that's what it takes then that's what it takes. There are errands to be done this week, doctor appointments, schedules to re-write, words to originally write, and school to prep for. Thank God for all of those things, and thank God for this life that He gives us. Where eternity matters most, that's something worth sticking around for because the best really is yet to come.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 22 August 2012

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 1.

Chapter 7 begins a section of proverbs about wisdom. As you can tell, this one contrasts two completely different concepts, but I think there is actually a connection between them. That connection is you and your name.

The other day I mentioned that my wife and I renewed our vows last weekend. Without dredging up all that happened in the last few years, let's just say I lost my good name. We lost ours, in fact, as much for my indiscretions as for peoples' thinking that she should leave, that she deserved better (which she did). God knew better than those nay-sayers, or us. Hard work, hard issues, and tough love were things He used to rebuild us. That and lots of patience.

Yet how do you regain a good name? It's very true what people say about one lie shattering a thousand truths. Affairs shatter trust. Control shatters confidence. Anger shatters peace. Divisions shatter unity. Through all those, people are watching. Through all those, you gradually lose your good name. How do you regain that?

In reality, do you want to regain it? Names are important, you know. If you think of it, your name is the first thing you give to someone; in many cases, it is the only gift you give. God's name matters so much to Him that he devoted a whole commandment (the third one, right after the ones that say "I'm the only God" and "Love me with all you've got") to explaining why His good name is important. When someone's trust in your name is shattered, how do you regain that trust? How do you change someone's opinion of you? The answer isn't really that complicated, and I'm thinking you know it already.

It takes hard work and that work has to start in God. I've known people who built back their marriage after dissolution, but I can't tell you that I know any one who has done so without help from the Man Upstairs. I'm sure there are people who rebuild their marriages into platonic friendships, equal partnerships, and tense dictatorships. I've known quite a few people who have bounced back from a split by declaring that, now they're past it all, they have the happiest, best relationship possible because they and their new love never fight, never argue, always agree. Whatever. When I meet such people, I wonder which one of them is giving in so the other can have what they want; like I said, tense dictatorship.

No, the only couples that I have ever known who rebuilt intimate marriages (and no, I'm not talking just about sex) are those who did so through God. It takes counseling, talking, forgiveness, real repentance, real sorrow, and real patience. Both sides need to work together, but both must do so following God's guidance. God helps us to pare through the underlying issues, through the hurt and the pain, and through doing this in an understandable climate of mistrust. God helps us re-learn how to think, say and do the things that are necessary to become considerate of each other and to give. God helps us to understand my friend Peter Kahle's quote (from his own father): "the nine hardest words in a relationship are 'I am sorry, I was wrong, please forgive me.'" They are right, and they're inspired. Re-investing in your relationship through the Almighty makes it both possible and worthwhile.

But through all of it, you're going to find that you think you'd sometimes rather be dead than alive. Sure, I know that eternity will be spectacular; hence why dying is better than being born. But what about now? It's HARD to regain trust, to re-earn love. We don't earn God's love – He gives it no matter what – but other people? Well, let's just say that people aren't God. It takes earnest work to re-earn what we've lost. With some people, it isn't even possible. Either we can't give or they won't receive. Some folks build up opinions that just won't be changed, and some of those people are people we value. That's just the way it is, though. When you realize that, when you're honestly, earnestly doing what you can – and more – to prove yourself, sometimes you get worn down, want to give up. It's natural; it may even be inevitable.

Except that it isn't. It's natural to feel beaten down, and it's even more natural to give up. What isn't natural is to try again and again, but that's the good part. We GET TO try again through Him. When everything else says we should give up, we get to try again. I guess that means love is unnatural. What isn't inevitable, too, is that we have to give up. Freedom is the natural yearning of the human spirit, and real freedom is found first and always in God. When we go to God with our issues, He works in us and through us to address them, to improve on them. God NEVER means bad for us, only good and His love. Making that change sometimes hurts; it can hurt a lot. But it's worth it. Giving up when there is still hope is really losing freedom. Trying again may just preserve that freedom for you because the freedom to choose to love someone who forgives you is the best freedom of all.

And whether you know it or not, it's what helps build back your good name.

The ceremony last Saturday wasn't a big soiree. It didn't take long to plan, and like I said the other day, I could have done more to invite a few other people who I wish I'd invited. But it was a big deal to me. It gives me hope. It may sound strange but I feel liberated, like I'm free to be somebody better than who I was. That I'm free to be the kind of husband, father and man that I just wasn't before. Like my good name is coming back but better, and that this life is indeed much better than the death I once knew. The wonderfully goofy thing about living in faith is that you don't need a ceremony or a line in the sand to know these things. The ceremony was meaningful, but God was with us, working in us, growing us long before it and He will be doing so long after.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 23 August 2012

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 2.

Buckle up, friend. It could be a somber ride for the next few days. Then again, maybe not.

The country music song of the year for 2004 was "Live Like You Were Dying" by Tim McGraw. Time for a true confession: I don't care for many of Mr. McGraw's songs. He's talented enough, but most of his music just rubs me the wrong way. I like the "Indian Outlaw" remake, and one called "I Like It, I Love It", and another called "Something Like That. Then there's one called "Angry All the Time" that he recorded with his wife, Faith Hill. But other than those and the one I just listed, I don't listen to much of his music. In fact, when he comes on the radio, I usually turn the dial.

The 'Live Like You Were Dying' song is exceptional though, and it segues perfectly off Ecclesiastes 7, verse 2. The song tells the story of talking with a man who found out he was terminally ill. Instead of curling up in a ball, he changed his life and LIVED. He went sky diving, he went Rocky Mountain climbing, he rode 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu. More than that, he loved deeper and he spoke sweeter, and he gave forgiveness he'd been denying. The last line of the refrain says "he said some day I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying." I'm betting you can hear the song in your head now.

Any questions?

My father died in 1997. He worked 35 years for Uncle Sam, retired in 1995 and spent six months renovating the home where he and Mom would retire. He had just a few short months to enjoy that home and enjoy retirement when he found out that he had terminal cancer. The initial diagnosis wasn't a death sentence, however it was grim and for a number of reasons the cancer just wouldn't go away. Now, Dad didn't go sky diving, mountain climbing or any of that. In fact, over the course of his illness, he gradually lost the ability to do almost everything he enjoyed. Reading, music, singing, even cooking and a good meal: all of them fell by the wayside as the cancer and cancer treatments took his senses. Dad had never been a particularly macho guy, and when I was growing up, if Dad got a cold he usually babied himself. When we found out he had cancer, I honestly expected him to be a softy.

He died the most courageous man I've ever met. I say that because he faced death by living, by keeping focused on doing whatever he could to mend and get better. He didn't complain, he didn't fret about his circumstances, and he didn't get lost in 'woe is me.' He was unafraid of new and painful treatments, and he was unafraid of facing the consequences each time the doctors gave him worse prognoses. Dad put all his affairs in order and talked frankly about his disease, finances, coping and the like. He mended fences with family and friends with whom he'd been cool, and he spent time with his kids and grandkids. Mom and Dad still took several long trips, mainly to see family but also just to return to normalcy. Why, just a few weeks before he stopped all treatments, he was in Colorado at my house, working hard with me to repaint the house. What's more, he did all this while growing realistically in faith. He was forthright when he spoke of what he believed, and for the first time in many years I saw that as much more than just Sunday morning appearances. Dad didn't want to die, but he also didn't shirk from it or cower in fear of it. As much as he could, my father learned to live like he was dying because, in fact, he was.

That's the point of what could be an otherwise maudlin verse. We should live fully and be prepared for death at any moment. None of us knows when we are going to die. It's a sad tragedy when any of us passes on, and there are no saccharin platitudes that we should offer to comfort someone's loss. There's just no easy way to lessen the shock or take away the hurt. Still, since my father died, I've learned to study Scripture more and it's given me a new perspective on death. It's not something to be feared because, even while it's the ultimate consequence for our sins, it's also something that God redesigned to usher us into the next phase of life. In fact, I've come to think of each person's death as a personal moment of mission accomplishment. When you

die, whatever purpose God put you here to fulfill has been fulfilled. Even when someone dies young or unexpectedly, I take comfort in knowing that while you or I might not understand why it happened, God does. God understands it, is in control of it, and in fact that person has completed their life. Their purpose is complete. They didn't just die. They finished. If you think about death that way, it isn't so frightening.

Awhile back, I quoted Chief Dan George from one of my favorite movies, "Little Big Man." In that movie, the chief repeatedly says, "today is a good day to die." I couldn't agree more. Today is a good day to die when I have lived every day reverently, fully, and boldly. Today would be a good day to die because I know where I'm going and I've done my best to be a good father, husband and man. I'm ready to die whenever it happens. I learned that from my Dad. He learned it by closing out his life in faith.

I suspect Tim McGraw might agree.

Today is a good day to die when you realize that, one day, when your life is complete, you will die. Live today fully. Love deeper, speak sweeter, give forgiveness you've been denying. That's not just country music: it's a Godly theme as old as these ancient proverbs.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 24 August 2012

Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 3.

Why do you think this one says what it says? Was King Solomon a gloomy gus? Here he was, the wealthiest, wisest man in the world and he seems forlorn. Hundreds of wives (that may be one reason), decades on the throne (that is pretty tiring), and he let his wisdom slip, trading his faith in God for faith in Baal, the Ashteroths, and other middle eastern gods. Maybe that's one reason.

Maybe there's another reason. If you remember from yesterday, we're doomed. Life is a one-way death trip and whether you're Bill Gates, Bill Clinton, or Bill from the gas station down the street you're going to die. You and I each owe a death for a life and there is nothing we can do to change that. If you're terrified of dying, maybe that's another reason why this says what it does.

Maybe, though, there's yet one more reason. Think about it: when you're feeling down, it feels good to commiserate. When you are feeling bad, it's nice to know there's someone in it with you. I'm sure a psychiatrist could tell me why this is, or a therapist could explain the psychological dynamic; I'll bet there is one. Me, I'm not that bright, and it really doesn't matter much to me at the moment why this is. I simply know that it is. When I'm feeling bad, I feel better if I know there's someone who can empathize with me.

I suppose it's because I'm usually pretty independent but even an independent guy wants to know there is someone who checks his six. As I get older, I find I like to talk more, too. That's no surprise: I can mangle a syllable with the worst of them and I mangle quite a few. But I'm analytic by nature; a therapist once told me it was as if I over-revere the intellect. Guess I'm guilty as charged. Consequently, I like to be able to talk through things that bother me. So when something gets under my skin, it's comforting to be with someone who listens and helps me unpack and process my issues.

Until recently (i.e. the last few years) I rarely considered that this could be a Godly thing. God wants us to support each other, to encourage each other. Mind you, if we're commiserating, I don't want you to solve my problems for me. I don't want someone to fix me, or to change, mold, remake, reshape, or make me over. I can do those things on my own if I feel they need doing. Suggestions and feedback are always welcome, but there's no quicker way to get my goat than to try to do something to me because you think it needs to be done.

But there's another side of it too. The older I get, the more I value friends. I've had many friends, but only a very few who I really let in close. When I was growing up, we moved around frequently and I learned to not let people get too close, to not build close friendships because they were just going to end anyway. At the time, you don't see how crazy that idea is. It takes maturity to realize that, to live life, we need other people and it's a better way to open ourselves to share even if it's only for a short time. I guess that's why I've taken to more openly sharing now, trying to learn ways to avoid building the walls of discomfort that deceptively told me for so long to block out other people. These days, I find it comforting to be able to listen. It's a rare and valuable comfort to be a comfort to someone. Listening is a gift. Simply listening and then praying with someone is a rare gift.

Christ had friends. He had twelve really good friends, and He was God on Earth. He who needed nobody other than Himself chose to love other people. He chose to share His life with people He called 'friend.' When they didn't understand His words, He helped them. Even though all of them deserted Him later, He still chose it. When He felt weak, He stayed with them. When He felt lonely, He sought their company. Jesus knew this verse and knew it well – after all, He had inspired it – but He only got to live it out as we do when He joined the ranks of homo sapiens. There's a Christian song that says "Who am I that you are mindful of me? I am a friend of God." No greater comfort could exist when you're feeling low.

It's a rare gift that others have done for me when I've been down. There's a fine line between being empathetic and crossing that line, and I consider it a blessing now to understand that, to be more cognizant of it. Being an

understanding friend doesn't mean you have to take responsibility for someone else's issues, but you do get to be involved in helping them work out the solution. In doing this, you share and you both improve. These days, I'm finding that the best way to accomplish that with them is to listen and be a witness of faith first. I think that's perhaps what Solomon was alluding to.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 27 August 2012

*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.
Ecclesiastes 7, verse 4.*

Verse 3 said "Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart." If you re-read verse 4, it's a related but slightly different thought. What's different? First, there is the word 'heart.' Verse 4 doesn't talk about a blanket condition (like sorrow being better than laughter). Instead, it talks about having a heart for such things. All the stuff in the world doesn't matter much if you don't take it to heart. When we do take something to heart, though, we're unstoppable. Then there is that whole concept of 'the house.' The house is all around us; the house can even be us. Another difference contrasts wisdom and mourning with foolishness and pleasure. Finally, there is the unmentioned glue that holds all of this together, namely that it is God who inspires the heart, God who is over and in all houses, and God who is with us through whatever condition we find ourselves.

With all those things in mind, let's talk about Shadow, which is the name my son figured out for his car; I promise I'll work to tie this in. Near as we can figure out, Shadow has a shadowy past. It's a 1997 Ford Taurus that we bought really cheap from a shady guy in East Texas. The Carfax report shows that it used to be a rental car, then was sold to someone in south Dallas a decade ago. After that, the car was worked hard. All the door panels (and dashboard) have been off at some time. The seats have been pulled and reset. The engine runs well but has been very used, and the car has 180,000 miles on it. Put two and two together and I think you'll find the car may have been used for drug running in east Texas. It's clean now, but time has taken a toll.

Shadow needs some loving. The title was all messed up, so I went through the proper channels to get it bonded and we now have clear title. The car needed a really deep cleaning, and it needed engine work. A new water pump, some new cables, a bit of electrical work, a charged battery and changing the fluids were all desperately overdue. There are still quite a few things that need to be done to the car, but my son and I have worked hard together to get it running soundly again. We finished the latest round of work just yesterday and when we went for a spin, the car sounded better and had more power than it's had at any time since we bought it. I wish I could describe the happiness on my son's face and how thrilled he is to have transportation again that actually transports instead of taking up space in front of the house.

We could have put our hearts in the house of pleasure as regards the car. As mentioned, I think that's how it got to be in the condition it's in. It would be all too easy to look at the thing as just a tool, just a means to an end or a way for the son to look cool and cruise the chicks. We could have simply chucked the car and gone out to buy another one; quite a few friends have said we should do this. The thing is, I just don't want to. The son and I have had some great bonding time learning how to fix this car. I am NOT a mechanic, and while I can learn to do simple repairs, I don't have many of the required tools or the space to do them. Still, he has always wanted to do things like this (and so have I) and we're learning together valuable skills that will serve us both well through the rest of our lives.

More than that, we're spending time together. It's God's way of bringing us some much needed father/son time in a way that benefits everyone. When we're doing this, we're in God's house where the real pleasure is Him.

The best way to get a grip on Shadow's innumerable problems is to view them with a wise heart in the heart of mourning. That doesn't mean being all Eeyore and fatalistic. It does no good to just frown and say "the car is a lemon" and fret about it. The car is ours and we need to find out what's wrong and what we can do about it. We bought it, son needs a car, and it's something we can change, make better. I feel a bit like a triage doctor, analyzing symptoms and deciding which to treat first. That means being realistic, not fatalistic. There are some things we can fix and some things for which we'll need help. Thankfully, we haven't run into transmission or header gasket problems, the U-joint doesn't wobble and the frame is straight and sound. Knowing that, the other things that are wrong with it are old-car woes and are things we can address one by one.

The best way to look at the problems is to look at them realistically, with a prayerful attitude, and ask for guidance on how to proceed. What can we fix and when should we call in the cavalry? When something else goes wrong, what can we do about it? What are our options? Most of all, keep that prayer line open and active at all times. Are we still talking about automotive repair or have we gone to a deeper level? God's in the house.

Like I said, I'm no mechanic. The problem we fixed yesterday was actually one of my own making. Last month, when I put a new water pump, I didn't correctly fasten the pulley that's attached to it, and it soon went bad. Solving that problem meant visiting auto parts stores and a really great junkyard south of Dallas. All through it, I prayed. I really, truly prayed for help because I was way out of my comfort zone in doing some pretty heavy auto repairs. Those prayers were answered through the comfort that comes from experienced confidence, the steady hand reminding me to be deliberate and patient (and to double check my work, connections, and so on), and that look on my son's face when he got his car back in running condition. Sure, there are many more things to be done with the vehicle. We need to fix the blower panel and change the bulbs behind the dash, then we need to reset the dashboard panel. All those door panels need to be properly set back into place. The AC needs a charge. I'm going to learn how to change plugs and wires because I don't know when or if it was ever done. Shocks, struts and some new tires are in order, and there is some body work and a paint job in the future. Through it all, God is at work keeping us focused on being wise in the realistic house of 'mourning' instead of the frivolous house of loose pleasure.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 28 August 2012

It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 5.

It really stinks to receive criticism. You could be a teenager who doesn't like a class on your schedule and want to drop it but can't because you failed earlier in high school and they can't adjust your schedule now to give you what you want. You could get fired from your job no-notice only to realize that you gave them the ammunition to do it. You could have work to do that you really, really don't want to do because it's dreadfully dull and not really your responsibility anyway, but said work still needs to be done and there's nobody else to do it. Or your plane has been delayed a few hours into the night and you find out that they may not fly at all.

The list could – and does – go on.

I appreciate it when people give me the straight scoop; I'm betting you do too. It really stinks to have someone sugar-coat the truth. If you had cancer, would you want the doctor to soft-pedal it, maybe paint a rosier picture than what you're really faced with? If something terrible happened to someone you love, would you want the real story or would you want to know what's really happening? Personally, I would much rather know what's really happening.

Even if it means bad news or news you don't want to hear. I tell the story of when I was a junior airman stationed in Maryland. I had been in the service for several years and while I was a good performer, I wasn't the best of the best. Still, I wanted to win one of the quarterly awards that the wing awarded for exemplary performance. Sure, some units gave them out as trinkets for favored members, but most were on the up and up. I went to our NCO in charge and asked why I hadn't ever been submitted for one. For someone to whom achievement seemed to come easily, it was tough to hear the truth. The NCOIC told me "because you aren't Airman of the Quarter material." He didn't mean it in an unkind way: he was simply being honest. I hadn't really done anything exceptional other than my job, and I hadn't done anything to really merit special recognition.

It was the first time I recall that someone had really leveled with me. I had always been a top student and a good worker; I knew what it was to earn accolades. I was used to receiving praise and adulation, and it felt odd to not have it flowing down on me. To tell you the truth now, I had forgotten how to do better; I was simply cruising along and expecting someone to praise me for it. To tell you the truth now it was a valuable and healthy lesson. The experience caused me to ratchet up my performance and really start playing my A-game in ways I hadn't before. The experience also caused me to ponder humility. I don't think "humble" is a word used to describe me very often, but you can't have someone rebuke you, take it to heart, and not come away feeling a bit of healthy humility.

And it was all because I was fortunate that a wise man had rebuked me and God helped me see the sense enough to not act like a fool about it.

Have you ever had someone tell you something you don't want to hear? It hurts. It really hurts. What that hurt comes around, though, I think a platitude comes in handy: God never gives you more than you can bear. It hurts when good medicine cures a sickness; it hurts to have a wound scoured out. What helps, though, is when the wound is clean and the healing can begin. Grace heals all wounds whether they are physical or emotional. A few moments of realizing God's grace give me the strength enough to endure far past what used to be my breaking point used to be.

The fool won't let this happen. A fool will keep denying that a problem exists or that he doesn't deserve rebuke. A fool will keep acting like nothing is wrong when, just beneath the surface, conflict is boiling. Other fools sing sweetly. That siren song is tempting, very alluring, quite attractive. In my experience, it's usually either flattering or has an edge of anger. What happens when you listen to that song? You know.

Over time, I won those quarterly awards in other units and for work that I'm still very proud of today. One quarter I won at the unit, squadron, group and wing levels for leading a team in fixing a badly dysfunctional system upgrade. Those things happened because I learned to appreciate the moments of grace, even when I didn't recognize what they were. I learned that one man's actions are usually the culmination of others' contribution, and that the best leaders are those who lead from the front while being willing to pitch in anywhere. In the private sector, those kinds of awards are different. I've been blessed to work with great responsibility with even greater teams. Part of working on a team is realizing that you are one, not the whole team, and that others are where they are because they've usually won the right to be there.

And sometimes grace flows down. When it does, you see there are moments of serendipity, like when you find you enjoy the class that you were just so sure you would hate. Or when you find that the job you left behind was worth leaving behind because the new one is much better anyway. And there are the times when you finish working and are blessed to realize that you really did good work after all whether somebody notices or not. And, believe it or not, sometimes you find yourself on a night flight to Minneapolis where you're the only one on board and they treat you like a king. When you're walking in God's grace, you're unburdened, free to do your best no matter whether you're up for an award or not. Sometimes, you're blessed to learn that those moments of grace are some of the best moments of all.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 29 August 2012

Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 6.

Have you ever burned thorns under a pot? Yeah, me neither. Thorn bushes are, to me, some of the most despicable plants on Earth. I'm all for burning them out, because when they are dry and you set them on fire they burn up quickly and loud. But to tell you the truth, the idea of this verse seems kind of improbable when read in the context of 21st century America where most people don't cook their food over an open fire. But some do.

Some of the most remarkable meals I've ever enjoyed, though, were cooked over a fire. They include every meal you eat while camping, where food cooked outdoors just seems to always taste better. More important, though, I remember meals cooked in China. The team of ladies who cooked all our meals in a small, remote village in southern China cooked all of them over open fires underneath fire-pits made of concrete blocks. The food was very native, with mostly boiled meats, lots of rice, and many vegetables (most of which I didn't recognize). I ate every bite and was glad for it and thankful for the ladies who worked to make it.

An even more important memory for me was of meals cooked in a small village in Uganda. Our team was doing mission work in several villages there, and in one we helped finish a church they were building. At the dedication, the villagers served a HUGE meal. I watched the ladies cook – I even helped one of the men roast a pig – and all the pots and pans were cooked over open fires in a field. As in China, I didn't recognize some of the foods, and most I had never had before. But again I ate every bite and felt blessed for it. Even more than in China, these people gave everything they had and did so in the only way they could.

I imagine what it must be like to cook all your meals that way, to cook something good over an open flame. Not on a clean metal stove or a blue gas burner but over crackling wood fires. The fire doesn't heat evenly unless you closely tend it. The food tastes smoky; bits of ash sometimes float into the stew. It takes hard work to cook like this, and for most of human history – indeed, in MOST of the world still today – it's how people cook.

And this is the comparison we have to chattering fools. The useless kindling, the brush and thorn ushes that are used to tend the fire under a cooking pot are as useless as the talk of fools. If you think about building a fire, you don't use a big log to start a fire. Firecraft starts with small bits of tinder, paper, kindling, twigs and brush, maybe even shavings or sticks. When they catch, you add progressively bigger pieces until the fire draws on its own and keeps burning. If you want a big fire, you feed it air and dry big tinder. If you want a small fire, you regulate the air flow and feed it small tinder.

The small stuff you stick into the cooking fire is more valuable than all the laughing on the midway, all the smack you hear, all the bold talk in the bar, and all the trash talking at the ball game. It's more valuable than your gossip, my political talk, or all the complaining and moaning of people at work.

Remember, too, that this verse comes at the end of a section where Solomon contrasts wisdom and foolishness, where he remarks that it's better to celebrate death than to revel in life. It's no coincidence or mistake that verse 7 caps the chattering of fools as being worth less than what you dispose of in the fire. It's like he's saying that all the foolishness of the world – the vanity of living for pleasure, of partying hard, and of putting your trust in things that don't really matter – isn't worth even the worst fuel you'd use to boil water.

Tall thorn bushes grow in the alley behind my house. A few weeks ago, the city came along and severely pruned them. Not long after, my son went out and finished the job, hacking them down so far that it will take many months for them to grow back. But grow back they will. I don't like the thorn bushes. Not only are they a pain in the neck to trim because of the sharp thick needles but they grow almost anywhere and don't seem to serve much purpose other than to scratch up cars. Over the last few years, we've occasionally trimmed them back and thrown the old branches over the fence because the bushes grow up from my neighbor's property

through a common fence. Those old branches are still there on the ground; my neighbor's property is a big farm and he never comes to clear the fence line. I sometimes wonder how quickly they would burn up if they ever caught fire. Earlier this month, we almost found out because a power line sparked and caught fire in part of the field. Fortunately, the fire was put out before it burned more than a few acres (which are already growing back in thick grass). Still, it makes me wonder.

If it happens again, I'll take my big pot outside and maybe put on a pot of stew. And then I think that it sounds better than all the clamoring on Facebook combined.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 August 2012

Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 7.

“Extortion” is a pretty heavy word. It’s a crime and a serious one. Not surprisingly, I strongly reject the term “hate crime” because every crime is an act of hate. No, I’m not debating that some crimes are exacerbated by real hate. Racism, prejudice, intolerance: they make terrible things worse, and I have no problem giving tougher sentences to criminals whose motivation was factors like these. But let’s not be fools. All crimes are crimes of hate. We hate God, we hate each other, we hate that others have something we don’t have. WE are the ones, then, who might just deserve those tougher sentences. All crime is hate crime.

Even extortion. Dictionary.com defines extortion as, “the crime of obtaining money or some other thing of value by the abuse of one’s office or authority” and “oppressive or illegal exaction, as of excessive price or interest.” Have you ever done that? Have you ever obtained something of value by using your position? I’m betting most of us aren’t true in-the-legal-system criminals, so I’ll ask you again: when was the last time you did something to ‘persuade’ someone to do something for you based on who or what you are?

Oh come on: parents do it all the time. So do spouses, especially ones who try to run our lives for us. Ask the wife who’s been manipulated by an overbearing husband who determines what she will do, drink, work, say, act or speak. It’s all for her own good, you know...sure...wanna buy that bridge in New York, mister? It happens at work, too. Project managers are notorious for bossing people around. And let’s not even get into talking what kind of low-life extortion union bosses are capable of.

Fools. Just a bunch of fools. Are you getting the vibe that they’re everywhere? I hope you’re not too offended (but maybe a little) when I remind you that YOU are one of them. So am I. We’re fools, my friend, when we use our position to persuade/coerce/strongly convince/force others to do our will. We extort things out of other people. We extort behavior and we extort status. And then we try to do it with God. Give me this or else. God, you do this for me or I’m gonna whatever. We use our position as loved children of God to tell Him what He should do. How’s that working out for you? Do you feel like as much of a fool as I do when you do it and it either blows up in your face or, even stronger, when He ignores what you say and do and does something spectacular and wonderful for you anyway? Join the club and put on your fool’s beanie.

What’s more, we bribe. Again, this is one that EVERY parent knows well. Don’t believe me? Go sit at a table with a bunch of kindergartners and convince them to eat their vegetables. Try to motivate an intransigent IT engineer to perform a backup, or re-schedule an automated job, or review some requirements and I’m betting you’ll find yourself in bargaining mode. Go to a church council meeting and listen to the wheeling and dealing. Have a talk with your spouse, or your in-laws, or sometimes even your best friend. In small ways and large we bribe each other. And, again, worst of all, we use that same line of attack with the Almighty. We approach the throne of God like a sleazy politician approaching a group of bankers. “Do this for me and I’ll do this for you.”

How does that feel? How does it feel to ratchet down on dealing with the God of ultimate love, justice and peace by treating him like a common criminal? How’s THAT kind of hope and change working out for you? Yeah, me too. Like when we extort him, when we try to bribe God, how’s that helping? How do we feel – what do we feel – when His grace still comes flowing down no matter how low we sink?

I’m not here to guilt you with this verse: I’m simply telling you about the way it is. We can make ourselves inured to even the lowest feelings, convincing ourselves that it simply has to be this way for us to get by. We can de-sensitize our hearts and rationalize our bad behavior as being what it takes just to muddle through.

You know as well as I do that those things are lies. Don’t trust feelings. They’re a cheap imitation of the truth, not the pure, cleansing, sometimes convicting reality of the truth. Trust God. Me and you, we be mates, just like Crocodile Dundee said. And because we be mates, this mate will tell his mate that we’re thick with petty

crimes like bribery and extortion in how we deal with each other but especially how we deal with our Maker. It's the deception of the ages going as far back as the serpent by the tree.

You know, too, that there's a better way. And I'm not here to guilt you into believing that, or guilt you into subjugating you to something that the deception tells you that you don't want to do. There IS a better way and you know it's true, even when it doesn't seem like an easier way; that, too, is part of the deception. I dare you to take Him at His word though and test those words to see whether His burden is light and His yoke is easy. You and I can look at the straight and narrow and think it's too hard, too straight and too narrow for damn dirty sinners like us. You do this for me and I'll do that for you and together we'll go around that straight and narrow path. Don't believe it, my friend. We be mates and we be mates with God too, just like ole Mick Dundee.

I'm sick (and tired, thank you Mr. Cosby) of being a fool, of letting my corrupted heart beat irregular and telling myself that this is the best that can be. The burden and yoke of my sins that I have carried has weighted me down and it doesn't get any lighter the more I try to use my position to coerce others to do X, Y or Z. I'm tired of a petty life of crime. There's a better way and I'm ready for it. Are you?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 31 August 2012

The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 8.

Another proverb that is good on its own but seems unrelated to the sayings around it. It's a good standalone piece of advice, but where does it fit in? I mean, up to now in Chapter 7 we've seen how death and eternity are preferable to Saturday night (being alright for fighting, of course), and how we're all common criminals. Now are we back to this whole death thing? If so, why the verse on extortion and why this one now?

Ah 'why.' How much of our lives do we spend asking that word? "Why" worked out really well for Job, too. "Why did you do this to me, Lord," he asked God. I think of God putting His arm around Job and answering "who are you?" Job, my man, I love you but who are you to tell me about how to be God? When you read the book of Job, you're struck by heavy contrasts: the serious and deadly nature of competing for a man's soul versus the absurdity of a mere man standing up to God Almighty and saying "yeah, what about it?"

So is this book. This chapter is a chapter about wisdom, all kinds of wisdom including those nuggets of it that seem to be misplaced (but really aren't). In the middle of expounding on the wisdom of focus in life, the author of the book reminds of a simple truth: the end is better than the beginning and to get to that end you need patience. It takes pride to begin an undertaking, and it takes pride to get you through it.

When do you celebrate: at the beginning or at the end? Sometimes both, you know, but usually it's the end, right? And what do you work for? Is it just a paycheck, just to get by, just to pay those bills? Nope! The job, even when we love it, is a means to an end. We work to reach completion. It's a wonderful thing to get started. It's even better to finish. Reaching the end means you've accomplished your mission, met your goal.

More importantly, though, it takes patience to get through something. Patience is required with my spouse. Patience is required with my children. It takes patience to work through project management, workplace drama, and schedule delays. It takes patience to deal with friends of differing opinions; it takes patience to hold my tongue and not always risk descending into sin by arguing for the last word. Patience is needed in city and long-distance driving. Patience is needed in church when the music is too loud and the pastor long-winded. Patience is needed to succeed through anything and in any relationship.

What's more, patience is the antidote to pride. I struggle with pride, keeping it in perspective and treating it like a sharp knife. Pride can be a useful tool and even a necessary weapon, but that tool and weapon can easily be used against us. The better way is to step back, have faith, analyze, and act, not react. Pride has us react; patience is proactive. Faith is a fruit of using both in love.

Get the picture? And you know what else? All those people, all those roles, all those things? They show great patience in dealing with a proud knucklehead like me!

When you consider these words, then, in the context of the ones that came before them, it makes perfect sense. You get to consider that, perhaps, 'because' really is the best answer to the 'why' question. I don't need to have God remind me that I'm not Him, but I'm thankful when He does. He doesn't do it with a celestial conversation of the ages, but He does do it with careful nudges and loving reminders all through my day. The answer comes in contentment, or unexpected kindness, or the small intellectual light bulbs that come on every now and then when I realize answers I think I should have known all along. It takes perseverance and determination to get through the times that lead up to these moments of serendipity. And it takes patience to deal with others and for them to deal with me no matter how determined either of us are.

Who am I that you are mindful of me? Who am I to ask 'why' something is the way it is? Some day in heaven, I look forward to meeting Job. I suspect he will have something interesting to say about it.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 5 September 2012

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 9

I've said before that I struggle with a hot temper. Middle age crept up on me – as it does on all of us – and I see now that, for me, learning to control my temper is a function of maturity. God bless the young people who from early ages are self-controlled and wise enough to know when to step back. I wasn't one of them, and I've been blessed to learn that anger is a reaction, an emotion but also a tool for us to use in our lives.

Today's verse is talking about more than that. Temporal anger flashes at us to react when things happen. It's a way of venting, of releasing things that probably should be released, just maybe in better ways. The second half of the verse mentions this, that anger is a thing of the moment that is up close and personal with us. It says that fools let anger control them, or let anger motivate them. It's foolishness, a chasing after the wind.

But that isn't really the full meaning of the verse. Key on that word "quickly" and then look at "spirit." Noodle that for a second and let's take a walk.

Our actions affect others; you and I both know this. My hot-button temper has been passed on to my son; this truly is one of the great regrets of my life, but I thank and praise God that He is working with my son early on, reshaping him and helping him to see about that anger. It used to be that he would throw tantrums; that lasted until adolescence. After that came the sullen stare of a disgruntled teenager; we still get this from time to time, though it's gradually started to abate even though he's only sixteen. After high school started, more adult reactions came about to his frustration, anger and angst. Not all of those have been constructive or positive.

I believe, however, that there are forces warring for his spirit. He's learning to confront his anger, to accept it when it happens, and to deal with it. I'm proud of him for that. It's a sign of maturity, and I look at it as positive fruit of his spirit. Such a development is an improvement on the way things used to be. Hopefully, with prayer and time, he will see how this can reshape his world for the better.

My wife and I read a daily Bible study, during the week from one book and from another on Sundays. Sunday's dealt with anger, and how to deal with it. The writer advised four steps...please note that, whenever a self-help or even devotional writer records how many steps it takes to do something, they usually lose my attention. In order, the steps were to confront your anger, separate the wrongdoer from the wrong, let go of the past, and then keep forgiving. I stink at all four of those, but I'm worst at number two. It's hard for me to separate the wrong from the wrongdoer when someone has done something that hurt me. I wrap up the two in a neat package and completely ignore the all-true maxim of 'hate the sin but love the sinner.' Without acknowledging the need to do step two, however, the other three steps are misplaced and hollow; without acknowledging step 2, going on to step 3 and letting go of that quick anger only fuels the anger and helps me to hold on to it.

These last 2 weeks have been full of political talk in America. I watched much of last week's convention in Tampa and part of this week's party in Charlotte. No matter which side of the aisle you're on, there's a lot of talk flying around that can get you angry if you let it. Some of it is just politics; some is invective; some is just a bunch of lies. I follow politics closely and find myself starting to boil every time I turn on certain channels or pan to some stations on the radio dial. Thus, for me this is a good verse to remember. Foolishness is the outcome for people who let their quick temper take over. It's stupid to get angry over small things; it's stupid to not get angry over things that should cause genuine outrage. More than either of these two things, it's ungodly to let one's temper reign where God should.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 6 September 2012

Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 10

Happy Days: do you remember that TV show? When I was a kid, it was one of my favorites. The stories were simple, the Fonzy was cool, things seemed easier. I have a romantic attachment to the 1950s even though I never lived in the 1950s. The doo-wop music, the cars, the clothes and style: it's interesting to me, and attractive. Popular culture portrays that as a simpler time, yet as it often is, pop culture is disingenuous. Such an attachment is somewhat foolish. It's crazy to think that, just because things used to be a certain way that they were better. I mean, the 50s were the era of bitter racial segregation, the Suez Crisis (that nearly blew up into war), expanding Soviet domination in Europe, red scares in America, greatly expanded poverty in Africa and Asia, and a host of other problems that were anything but insignificant. Perhaps what seems simple in reflection wasn't so simple after all.

Take my grandmother's time. My grandma was an amazing woman. She lived in the time that transcended the age of horse and buggy into the age of space travel. When she was born, Teddy Roosevelt was president; she died when Bill Clinton was in office. My grandmother wasn't a great cook, but she was a good one and some things that she made were downright wonderful. Sometimes, when I smell bacon frying or get a whiff of fresh coffee or even cooking vegetables, I go back to her kitchen in central Minnesota where I spent so many times in my youth. I think life might have been simpler back then, back when she was a young woman.

And then I think that those were the days when your house was quarantined if someone contracted scarlet fever. Those were the days when you had to hand-crank the engine block to start the car; my grandmother broke her arm one time doing this on a Minnesota winter day with two small children in an unheated car. The early 1900s were the days when laundry took all day to do between boiling the water and scrubbing on a washboard. Those were the days when a cut on your finger could quickly go into gangrene if you weren't careful; if you weren't careful, things like that could actually kill you.

Here in America, those ancient cares need not bother us any longer, at least as long as the lights are on. Technology is progress, and progress is a gift from God. It is a blessing to have appliances that make life convenient, medicine that cures disease, and technology that makes all kinds of information available for little more than a mouse click. I'm thankful to live in a place and time where things are plentiful and easier than they have ever been in history. It doesn't take more than a few hours ride to another part of the world to see how tough things can be, how people still live in squalor and primitive conditions not much unchanged in the last five thousand years. If you spend all your time reminiscing about how great things used to be, don't forget to temper those memories with the reality that living in those days wasn't all easy street. If you think they were, take a trip to Kampala, Quito, or maybe just out to the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. That's quite a reality check.

But there's another reason why the verse cautions against longing for the past. "Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions." I think that focusing on the past is like thumbing your nose at God. It's little more than an act of selfishness. If I'm sitting on my plush sofa, watching my big screen TV (where I'm flipping between two channels) in my air conditioned twenty-two hundred square foot home and all I can think is 'woe is me' about how bad things are and how they used to be better, well, I'm a fool. All those things, then and now, are blessings from God. They are the fruits of my hard work and the result of using talents God gave to me. More than that, they are gifts from Him, things I don't really deserve but things with which He has blessed me anyway.

Here God gives me a wonderful life full of wonderful people, wonderful things, and plain and simple wonder and the best I can do is wish for something I used to have...or something that never really was? Yep. Selfish. Completely self-centered. Focusing on what we don't have or who we aren't instead of what we do have and who we are is like denying God's blessing and providence in our lives. It's like telling Him, "yeah, but it's not good enough." Recently I've been reading the book of Numbers, about how the wandering Israelites kept

grumbling to Moses “why did you lead us out here, out of Egypt where we were fed, thriving and happy?” How quickly they forgot that, in Egypt, they had been slaves, brutalized, starved and beaten. They forgot that they had cried for four hundred years for deliverance. Fools.

Sad to say, though, I’m not much different. I still replay old scenes in my mind. I still wax nostalgic over things that are better in memory than they were in fact. Maybe it’s because we choose to remember the good or important things while discarding the rest. In doing so, we’re picking and choosing which of God’s blessings we’ll hold to, then choosing the memory of those blessings instead of the obvious blessing of things right in front of us today. When we do that, we are sticking our finger in God’s eye, insinuating “you’re not good enough for me” even though He provides much more than we could ever dream. I do this all the time; do you?

Perhaps a better way would be to remember we are gifted to live each day of our lives as who and where we are, and that this is for a reason: God’s good reason, even when we don’t understand it. There is good to be had in every day; there is good to be made by living out our faith every day. The past is gone for a reason and we do better to appreciate today as the gift it is. When we do that, we realize that we can live in the Happy Days here and now.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 7 September 2012

Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 11

What good is it to be wise in a dark room? Well, we can talk about making good choices when we're in a dark room with the opposite sex. Or we can talk about thinking positively when you're scared and alone. Or we can talk about contemplating wise choices, wise thoughts, wise prayer and wise dreams when you're falling asleep at night. Or we can talk about how wisdom grows in sleep because sleep renews us and allows us to see things (literally) in a new light. Yes, there is wisdom to be had in a dark room.

That isn't what this is talking about. It is indirectly inferred, but it isn't the point at hand. Let's break it down.

Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing. Stop there. Wisdom is like a billion dollar fortune left to you and that's a good thing. Would it be a good thing for you to wake up one morning and learn that you were actually related to Warren Buffett and that you stand to inherit billions when he dies? Yep! That could be a good thing. I don't know which is the more meaningful statement, that is, saying that wisdom is like an inheritance, an inheritance is a good thing, or wisdom is a good thing. All three of those are meaningful, but when you couple them they take on whole new meaning. It's a simple statement but there is profound depth to it. Isn't that always the way (especially with Scripture)? Even the simplest statements transcend time and hold great meaning for us thousands of years after they were written.

But then you move to the second thought, namely that this good wisdom benefits those who see the sun. We all see the sun, don't we? I mean, even if you live in that underground town in Australia, you are still governed by the sun. The time to which you'd set your clocks is determined based on our position relative to the sun. Gravity and motion are still affected by our rotation around the sun. We ALL see the sun, even when we are nocturnal. And the sun gives us light to see things as they are instead of just how we imagine them to be. Sunlight illuminates dark rooms; sunlight warms dark and cold spaces...or people.

Wisdom is warmer, brighter and better than mere sunlight.

So it's a good reminder to know that wisdom benefits everyone. These days I think that this simple message is also a good one to remember. In a time when devastating war threatens, technology seems to spin our lives faster, famine and pestilence threaten more people than at any other time in history, and Lindsey Lohan is still making movies, it's good to know that the simple things still are (thank you Jim Brickman). Common sense still rules when folly (and Ms Lohan's movies) have run their course. Wisdom translates beyond language, and wisdom moves across borders without a passport. Wisdom simply is what it is because it is a gift from He who simply Is. Wisdom benefits everyone who sees the sun, everyone who is under the sun.

Or is it "see the Son?" That simple one-letter substitution is appropriate and makes all the difference in the world. I like to think it might have even been something Solomon inferred in his wording. God's wisdom, like an inheritance, makes us rich and always benefits us. No, of course we aren't just talking about money; that whole prosperity gospel isn't worth as much as a Lindsey Lohan movie. God's wisdom is a common-sense thing that is a gift from Him who gave us forever life. Whether we accept that gift is a different point. That it is a wise inheritance, a good thing, and a thing given to us whether we accept it or not is one thing the verse insinuates. We are ALL under God's Son whether we believe it or not. Just like the sun in the sky, the Son in the sky shines life-giving light on everyone. Just like the sun, the Son provides sustenance. Unlike the sun, the Son is alive, though, and the more you get to know Him the more you see that He is the foundation of all knowledge, wisdom and love. He even made the sun. When you see that, you see those are good things and that they make you far wealthier than the Oracle of Omaha could ever dream of becoming.

Oh, and no disrespect to Lindsey Lohan. I actually like a few of her movies. She was a cute kid. And no disrespect intended to Warren Buffett either. I wish them both well.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 10 September 2012

Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 12.

Is your income a shelter or is it an escape? No, this isn't one of those Sunday morning sermons that tries to guilt you into feeling bad because you make more than the average Joe and you don't give 90 percent of it to the church. Do with your money what you will. It's yours, not mine. I have earned my own and, to be quite frank, I really don't care much how much you make or what you do with yours. It's your business, nobody else's.

And yet, I'm going to ask you that question again: is your income a shelter or is it an escape? Here at Chez Terry we're into the Walking Dead. If you haven't watched it, The Walking Dead is a show on AMC about life after a zombie apocalypse. Season three starts next month, and my son and I have been busy watching seasons one and two on DVD. Before watching these, I really couldn't have cared less about zombies. I mean, it's far-fetched and improbable. Zombies are just characters from cheesy monster movies. But the show is really well done and it tells the story of a group of survivors as they, well, survive after something happens that makes the dead come alive and start eating anyone left. In such a time, when the world as we know it has ceased to exist, money, status, wealth, and affluence mean nothing. What means something is wits, knowledge, and the ability to survive. Conventional knowledge, even common sense, have broken down.

What good would your income do you in a zombie apocalypse? For all that matter, what good would our incomes do us in ANY apocalypse? In such a situation, there would be no difference between the billionaire trying to survive and the ex-con trying to survive. Now, let's get something straight: there are no zombies. There never have been. There is zero chance of anything like a zombie apocalypse happening. If there were, though, what good would your 401K do? Or your clean house? Or having the project plan completed ahead of schedule? Or making sure you did your kids' homework so they could get all As? What good would you do? And where would you turn?

When the world around you breaks down, where will you turn?

That's one point we find about the Walking Dead that is intriguing. The characters become more and more base, trying hard to retain some semblance of being civilized while living in a world that has become brutal and unreliably random. Where do the people turn when things break down? Mid-way through season two, one character turns to Scripture, insisting that, in the previous weeks of mayhem, they have tried to get in their Bible study when they could. At one point, the same character says "I always knew He promised resurrection. I just thought he had something else in mind." Not long after, he's fighting for survival, shooting zombies in the head as they advance on and on, overrunning the farm that has been in the man's family for two centuries.

How quickly do you think our world could break down and what do you think you would do if it did?

When hordes of zombies are overrunning your farm, would you grab your loved ones and a gun or would you go print out your latest investment statements? Or think of it this way: if the EMP device detonates over your city, would you think first of trying to count your money or would you think first of trying to fill the bathtub before the water turns off?

A few nights ago, the power went out at our house. We had company who had traveled all the way across country to see us and, after a long, hectic day, in 90 degree heat, the power (and the A/C) went out. Everything went pitch-black and after a few minutes of visiting, we all went to bed. In bed, I laid there and fell asleep praying, silently thanking God for all the many blessings He gave me that day, including the power outage. I reminded myself that the power would soon be on again, but what if it hadn't come on? This column wouldn't have been written, all the things we did through this busy weekend wouldn't have happened, and my life here in easy living North Texas would have been greatly disrupted. Without power, I think it wouldn't take long for

the 'normal' situation here in the suburbs to evolve – or devolve – into something unexpected. I think people here on Easy Street would have difficulty adapting if the power, water, and gas went off. I know I would. And yet I've traveled to places around the world where people still live without power, running water and such. Aside from the problem of basic sanitation, the bottom line is that people still live.

What is it that gives us survival skills? Wisdom. It's wisdom to watch and learn, to be observant, to trust in faith and our abilities, to do what is necessary based on what we know. God doesn't say to us 'stick your head in the sand and let me take care of everything.' He says 'believe and have faith' and He then gives us knowledge, abilities, resources and each other.

Now that I've watched The Walking Dead, I think that the people of Uganda, Laos and interior Ecuador would survive the zombie apocalypse better than people in Frisco, Texas. If you ask my son, he's convinced the zombies are coming. If you go to our local mall, or maybe Wal Mart on a Saturday morning, you might think he has a point. Knowing what I know and trusting in Him and that, I'm ready for it (as well as season three of that TV show).

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 September 2012

Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? Ecclesiastes 7, verse 13.

The power of God astounds me. I would have said “amazes” me but I’m trying to avoid using the words ‘amazes’ or ‘amazing’ because I think they’re overused. Amazing is a race. Amazing is Mr. Kreskin. Blah. So, instead, I choose a different word to describe what comprehending God’s power makes me feel. I’m astounded by it. Floored, dropped, stupefied, dumbfounded, silenced. Choose your own pet word and you describe it in your own way. That’s the cool part about our faith journeys. Yours is different from mine but it’s all good.

Yet we all get to come back to shared Scripture and see how the things that bind us together are common and good. Among those is that astounding power of God. You’ve heard me say that I don’t accept manmade global warming. I simply don’t. We aren’t going to go political here; I simply think it’s improbable and impossible for man to change the planet in such a way to heat it up.

But God can. In fact, one day, He will. He already promised to do it.

If you subscribe to the idea of pre-destination, namely that God has already seen your path in life before you have and that your life is already destined and willed by God, can you tell me what you can do to stop it? God is over, in and through all things. In practical reality, what can you or I do to stop Him?

If God decided to snuff out the Sun tomorrow, could we stop it? We could explain it; we could analyze it. Talk radio could discuss it and suspect it’s a nefarious government plot. Politicians could harp about it and say it’s a sign they need to raise taxes. But if God decided to put out the Sun tomorrow, there really isn’t anything we could do about it. Ditto if he decided that honeybees should talk, grass would be purple, Brussels sprouts would actually taste good to most people, and Adam Sandler should win an Academy Award.

So we agree: God is unstoppable. There isn’t much you or I or even the humanity collective could do to stop Him. It’s simply a fact of life. That’s the big part of the verse, but let’s not gloss over a few small things about the verse that it’s easy to overlook. In fact, I’m betting you already have just in reading along my train of thought.

There is the word “consider.” The New Living Translation has the word “Accept” in there. Ok, that works too. The Good News says “think about;” But the NIV and the ‘original’ King James and a number of other versions all say “consider” so that’s the version we’ll go with for now. To consider is not just a command: it’s a privilege. Right from the start, God is both directing and asking us to contemplate His astounding power. He is God. He speaks matter, time and space into existence. He does it not for some celestial ego high: He does it because He is pure love and wants us to appreciate, then share, that love.

So He asks us to consider. That requires pondering, and observation, and cogitation, and contemplation. It is active engagement in Him and what He can do. God asks us to sit, be still, and think about Him. And when He does that, good things happen for us.

Then there is that whole crooked deal. Does God make things crooked? Ever been to the mountains? They aren’t symmetrical. Just yesterday I was flying from Texas to Minnesota and I looked out at the landscape 30000 feet below. It’s all crooked. The powers of erosion, seasons, and time have weathered the landscape, moved riverbanks, and shifted fields. Human-controlled landscape like tended fields and towns is miniscule compared to the amount of land affected by nature. Nothing in Genesis says “God made a perfectly shaped world where every corner is offset by another and every edge is smooth.” It does say, however, that God saw what He made and considered it good.

So, this is a long way of saying “yes, God can make crooked things.”

Let's take a tough but substantial leap here. Does that mean that God can put crooked things in our lives? Does that mean that God can put bad things into our lives? I think any brutally honest answer to this has to be yes. God doesn't desire pain, hurt, or harm for us. He desires only the opposite and designs only the opposite in our lives. Yet can He put crooked things on our paths? Absolutely. More and more I think it's really we who put them there. Most of the time, the things that we encounter, the obstacles we have to cross, the trouble we find, well, we find those things because of choices we make.

In all of them, though, God is at work turning the crooked straight. He made the crooked but he straightens it out with His love to demonstrate that love for us. He turns wrong to right and right to better, even when it's hard for us to see.

There's a George Strait song called "I Saw God Today." The refrain to that song says, "I've been to church, I've read the book, I know he's here, But I don't look near as often as I should. Yeah, I know I should. His fingerprints are everywhere. I just slowed down to stop and stare. Opened my eyes and man I swear I saw God today." It's everywhere and the power of God astounds me. Whether it's looking up at the stars or flying over that American landscape and realizing that He shaped it to be specifically what it is, I see the power of God everywhere. It's in heroes rushing into the Twin Towers to save who they could. It's in little babies sleeping, and in the mysterious way He imbues comfort into our lives through His word, through the ways we get fresh new perspectives on verses we've read a dozen times already. THAT is truly amazing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12 September 2012

When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 14.

Here's another verse where we get to consider. A translation for it may be 'no matter what's happening, remember God is in control so you don't need to worry about tomorrow.' Do the honorable thing? God is there, cheering you on. Do the dishonorable thing? God is there, working and imploring you to turn to a better way, working to turn around the consequences of our sins to bring Divine glory. The guilt of them He has already taken away.

Really? Really. And to pass on this nugget of truth, God asks us again to consider, to think about and accept, this simple truth. It isn't hard, it isn't tough, and it isn't a difficult thing to do. God asks us to consider that He is always around.

Notice a few things, too. The verse encourages happiness. It acknowledges that happiness is a result of good, in this case good times. When times are good, we should be happy. We should make the choice to be happy; we should choose happiness. When times are good, we can choose many other things, say greed or obsession or insecurity or skepticism. Instead of those, the verse says choose happiness, be happy. Let ourselves be happy. It's what God advises us to do. Think about that.

And when times are bad? We are to consider that God is over all things, including the bad times. It's not reasonable to tell someone 'be happy' when they lose their home, or a loved one dies, or they have a bad day full of crisis, or your teenage daughter says "I'm pregnant." You could say that such a thing is foolish, even cruel. It's not a wise thing to tell someone 'be happy' when their car is smashed or their kids are disobedient or when there people have heavy bills and there is more month than money left. Again, more cruelty.

It can be a starkly loving thing, though, to gently remind someone that God is somehow at work, then leave it at that. Just love on them. Let them absorb it, chew on it, let it sink in.

Let them come to the realization that God really is in the driver's seat. He made good times and bad; He allows both. He encourages the celebration and uses the mourning to point to the fact that He loves us. We don't always bring on the bad times ourselves, though sometimes we do. That isn't the point: whether we deserve the bad times or not, God is still love and still good and still involved in our lives. You can cheat on your spouse, steal from the church treasury, roast kittens, and pay your taxes on April 16th while you pre-date the check to the day before: God is still at work. He made ALL times, allows ALL things to demonstrate His glory. Here's where I shut my ecclesiastical chops and say that, if you want to know more, please consult the book of Romans.

After you do that, then consider (there's that word again) the last part of the verse, namely that you can't forecast tomorrow. I chuckle when weathermen tell us "tomorrow it will be X, Y or Z." And I get a chuckle when my kids simply KNOW what someone else will think or do. After all, they're kids! They know it all! Tell me how much blood, how many cells will pass through your veins in the next 30 seconds. Or how many clouds will pass over Poughkeepsie at noon on October 1st. Please tell me what your dog will do the next time he sees three squirrels, which direction he'll run. And please tell me how long it will take the server at McDonalds to take your order and deliver your Big Mac (maybe even predict the temperature of those two all-beef patties).

Simple stuff? I think you get the picture. For all we 'know' there is so much that we don't, especially about tomorrow. It's easy to be wrong but so much harder to be right and not be a jerk about it. Forecasters, pundits and prognosticators are simply making educated guesses. Oh sure, I believe I know what my wife's reaction would be if I told her I wrecked the car (not good), and I think I know what my boss would do if I spouted off at him with a line of profanity (fire me while responding in kind). But do I KNOW? True confession: no, I really don't. Neither do you.

Neither you, me, nor Stephen Hawking can tell you if Terra Firma will still be revolving around the Sun come January 1, 2013; maybe the Mayan's had it correct. We can't even tell you if it will still be happening next Tuesday. We don't know. For all our human arrogance, we just don't. That's what the verse is saying. God is in control so even though we don't know what will happen tomorrow (let alone all that's happening right now), it will be ok. Even more, because we don't know what will happen next, to God be the glory accordingly. God does know. He simply holds His cards very close, and that's a good thing. After all, would you REALLY want to know what happens to you next? Could you live with it knowing that you might not be able to change it?

Me neither. That's why I don't want to know. It's better to live trusting that God is in control and have faith in Him, faith in that. When things get tight today – and you have to admit that, at some point, they probably will – consider, think about, accept and noodle that thought for awhile. Then reach out to Him in prayer.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 September 2012

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 15.

Haven't we all, your highness? King Solomon, haven't we all known this?

The government mis-steps in reaction to a crisis and yet it is the person making challenging statements about those mis-steps who is criticized. A young child lives a harmless life, a life of loving goodness, and dies at seven of leukemia. An old nun lives a life of despairing servitude and serving despair in the slums of Calcutta. The disgraced former president is hailed as the political savior of his faction. There is a kind grandmother who lives her entire life caring for others and dies penniless in a nursing home having never really known true happiness. And there is the story of that minister in Iran who was held in jail for a year for refusing to recant his Christian faith and turn from his apostasy back to Islam.

Any of these statements could have been taken from the press of our time; some of them were. Yet the point the three thousand year old verse makes is true, namely that these kinds of stories are nothing new. The good die young and the wicked live long lives of luxury. That's an extreme statement though; one that really doesn't fully square with commonplace life. How about this instead? You do the right thing and get no credit for it while the weasel gets ahead for breaking the rules. Has that ever happened in your experience? Or did your parents ever punish you for something you didn't do while your sibling got away with what they did? Does that hit closer to home?

In it, through it, and around it, there is God. The best any of us can answer when we ask "why" about these things is "because." That 'because' is because of God. My kids would hate that answer; don't all kids rail on us when they ask why they can't do something and we answer 'because?' Understanding the meaning of the word, though, comes with maturity and time. 'Because God said so' or 'because of God' means something different to me now than it did even just a few years ago. Sometimes the only right answer to such an ethereal questioning 'why' really is 'because of God.' Because of the love of God we know that He works in, through, and around all situations in our lives. That's the essence of faith: that God loved us enough to do for us what we couldn't. When we accept and cling to believing in that, the answer of 'because' makes sense. When we don't, it becomes a frustration to us and life seems meaningless. More so, life without God is exposed as meaningless and we are vexed at why the good die young and the bad get away with murder (sometimes literally).

And still there is the mystery of God. To give meaning to the meaningless and all the answers to all the questions of eternity, there is the mysterious and meaningful loving presence of God.

A life lived solely in and for the human experience is meaningless. There is no purpose in it; there is no higher calling, no reason or even reason to search for a reason. We are deluded if we think that the pursuit or cherishing of knowledge, power or possessions is purpose. Solomon called it 'a chasing after the wind.' A life lived only for the sake of living, of being human, even of glorifying just the human condition is a life of petty poverty. It is meaningless. Yet in what is commonly called 'post-modern America,' there are so many folks to whom this seems the highest aspiration. Again, this is nothing new. History has seen this many times before. History has seen this kind of thing happen in empires large and small, in families and situations all the way back to antiquity. I think an earlier chapter said it over and over: "there is nothing new under the sun." Amen.

Because of God, because of the mystery of Him, there is meaning. Because of God, all the things that seem unjust or unfair to us have restitution. Sometimes that's immediate, sometimes it will take a lifetime. However long it takes, it is His promise. When we are still to know Him, He never leaves us empty. And when we know Him, the fairness questions of all history take on meaning. We see them for what they are and are finally free to find their answer in one that will last.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 14 September 2012

Do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise — why destroy yourself? Do not be over-wicked, and do not be a fool — why die before your time? Ecclesiastes 7, verses 16 and 17.

There is something good to be said in taking verses sixteen through eighteen together; in the next column we'll do just that. And yet, there is a message here in just these two contrasts that is distinct and separate, and that's the one I'd like to talk about with you today.

Barry Goldwater is famous for saying many great things, but the statement for which he's most famous is this one: "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." He said this while accepting the Republican presidential nomination in 1964 and it has been a rallying credo for conservatives ever since. Is that what the verse means? Hardly.

And then there was Neville Chamberlain, seeking peace through appeasement at Munich in 1938. He succeeded in buying a year's peace in Europe. He also sentenced most of Slavic Europe to Nazi domination. Where is the verse in what Prime Minister Chamberlain did? Verse 17 seems to speak of it, but appeasement was also not "over-wise." Where does it fit in there?

Or just this week in the middle east. The pretext for the widespread Muslim riots is an insensitive movie made in the United States, yet this is really only an excuse. Does that give them the right to murder people and commit potential acts of war? In the last few years, our government abided our wishes by doing what it thought best in reaching out to a group that was both alienated and threatening. This week, that dog wheeled around and bit. Was it righteous and wise to reach out in peace, even to people who didn't want to make peace with us on terms we understand? Or was it wicked and foolish? Certainly mutilating and murdering innocent diplomats is wicked and foolish. Where does that fit in with these verses?

If you read my Facebook page, you get quite a few Twitter shares, and lots of shared pictures that I find funny. These Proverbials are posted there as are quite a few Bible verses. And you get quite a lot of political discussion. I like social media for this: to me, it is the town hall of today. Some of what you read on my page will seem extreme, from both sides of the political spectrum. As long as the discourse is civil (no name calling) I'm all for it. But if you read enough, you'll see righteousness, wisdom, wickedness and foolishness all making center-stage appearances by yours truly and my troupe of opinionated debaters. Is this what the verses are talking about.

Finally, yesterday's verse was "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness." I think a case could be made that the righteous are wise and the wicked are foolish, yet it is the wise who died and the foolish who thrived. And even THIS wasn't what today's verse is talking about.

Just what is this distinct, separate, and obviously hidden message? It's hidden in plain sight, in-between the words, in the spaces where meaning sets in: everything in moderation.

Don't be so smart that you're sanctimonious; this is one I struggle with (the sanctimony, not the intelligence). Don't be so pious that you shut out the world. Don't be so upright and rigid that you close off opportunities to simply love other people. In doing these things, we are the opposite of the outgoing agape love that exemplifies God in Christ. Wisdom for its own sake is idolatry, not of God, certainly not His desire or command. Here is where I think of my great grandmother, who I never met. I'm told she was upright, faithful, religious, pious, stern and harsh. She was wise by the measures of her time. In being all those admirable things, she became unloving and cold, and her life showed it. God wants us to love Him as He loves us by sharing that with others. He doesn't command us to be unhappy, or even to replace that upright, faithful piety with unhappiness. Instead, He commands us to seek our happiness through Him, through His love. If we shroud

that in sanctimony, piety, uprightness and propriety, we build walls around a love that was never meant to be walled in.

And on the other side there is the reminder that wickedness can kill you. All sin is separation from God. If you're unhappy, ask yourself why. 9 times out of 10 it's because of a choice you made, something that has affected you and how you chose to react to it. Too many of us, me included, choose to whipsaw when we're presented with unhappiness. Why go half-way when there's a sin in front of us; choose your own pet vice here. Hey! It's like chocolate! Tastes really good, even addicting; sublime but powerful, sweet but with just a hint of sour and darkness. It's tempting. Why go half-way? Yep! Eat the whole thing; just this once won't hurt you. Ok, just this once again, but this time you're done, right?

You know the rest. Why destroy yourself? How do you cook a live frog? Do you throw him in a pot of hot water just to watch him jump out, or do you put him in a pot of cool water and gradually turn up the temperature so that he doesn't notice it? Before he or you realize, you and he are cooked. How have your sins, your wickedness cooked you, destroyed you? This blog is replete with stories of mine.

The answer? Everything in moderation. Piety and uprightness for sure but apply them in moderation. Judicious restraint from wickedness and temptation, to be sure, at all times, but not so much that we don't see the world. Be in the world, just not of it (to paraphrase Christ's lesson). We can't do that wearing blinders. Instead, each day let's wade in slowly, judiciously where sin threatens. NOTHING can take our faith away; only we can give it away. That's a powerful shield and weapon in our defense when temptation comes (and it will). Today's verses remind us that extremes, polar opposites, and both helpful reactions and tempting vices are factors in our world. We struggle with them every day. The way to face that struggle is in faith, moderating how we act while not compromising that faith.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 17 September 2012

Do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise — why destroy yourself? Do not be over-wicked, and do not be a fool — why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes. Ecclesiastes 7, verses 16 through 18.

So we come to verse I mentioned last time. I think you can see that all three verses here work together; thank you for indulging my expounding on a point during the last proverbial. Let's tie the three verses together and see where He takes us.

It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Is it just me or does this circular bit of advice seem to be playing both sides (and neither)? I mean, I'm looking for some bit of practical advice that will help me to neither destroy myself nor die. I am looking for ways to stop being over-righteous (or self-righteous), over-wise (and unwise), over-wicked (and try to be not at all) and foolish (as always). I'm playing Who Wants to be a Millionaire with my life and I call Solomon for a lifeline because he was the wisest man who ever lived and what does he do? He responds with a wink and a nod and quips off this little nugget of mystery. I could have figured that one out on my own (except I'm really not that smart).

And yet...

...And yet, through the mystery, God is counseling you and me to not get too big for our britches no matter what we do. He's telling us to cling to what is best in life to give us an edge. We are to respect, revere, and honor God by avoiding extremes. Too hot, too cold, too dangerous, too safe, too expensive, too cheap, too fun, too sad, too Republican, too Democrat, too right, too wrong, too humble, too proud, too obsequious, too withdrawn; go all Spice Girls even: too much of something is bad enough...too much of nothing is just as tough. If we fear God we should live in such a way as to avoid extremes. When we get near the edge, we are near danger. With God we need not fear anything, yet neither are we to mock that fear by flaunting, testing, or mocking it.

In living a life of all things in moderation, there are a few things about the extremes that the verse implies. It implies that we should know about them, understand them. My son is in junior year high school chemistry and he detests it. It's not the experimentation part he detests; they haven't gotten there yet. No, it's learning the measuring systems, periodic table, and the basics that he is finding to be tedious. I remember learning these things myself and I found it overwhelming, yet he has to know about them before he can undertake (and understand) complex concepts and experiments. I don't have to fly to Cairo to understand that there are ongoing protests there spurred on by religious animosity, ancient hatred, and class envy. Living in over-extended America, though, I need to be informed about those things to know how they will impact my life here. I don't have to vote for the guy who is running on things that I oppose, or whose track record I think is beyond contempt, but I do need to understand why he has done what he's done and why he says what he says. We don't need to participate in extremes to understand them. Indeed, I truly think that most people who do participate in extreme behavior don't understand what they're doing. I don't need to do that: I just need to understand.

The verse also implies that we need to know our own limits. Living in the me-first consumption world of North Texas, this one can be tough. It's a wonderful place of ostentatious spending, over-indulged children, helicopter parents, and California transplants. Beyond those good things, it's also a place where it isn't hard to learn a few facts about who you are. To keep up with the Joneses can mean spending more money than you have. To involve your kids in every activity can mean over-extending both your finances and your schedule. To compare yourself against "them" can mean admitting some pretty ugly truths about both of us. If we're to avoid extremes, we need to understand what our own spiritual, financial, emotional, personal, professional, whatever limits are. Without knowing this, how will you ever know when you're in danger of getting too close to the fire?

Finally, the verse implies tenacity. Our model for being tenacious in life is God Himself. A holy, just and possibly pissed off God could have long ago cast you and me aside and made a better man. He did it once before; ever hear of the great Flood? Instead, God is tenacious, holding on to you and me with grit and ferocious tenacity. The beauty of baptism isn't just that there is the symbolic washing away of all wrongs. I think the bigger beauty is that God takes hold of us and grasps us forever and that He wraps himself around us like a pool of warm water, drowning out sin and sorrow, washing away our grime, and warming our cold core. Nothing can take us away from Him; nothing can take Him away from us; nothing can ever make Him give us up. Sure, we can give up our faith; there's always free will. That's our doing, not His. Even then, He tenaciously keeps coming back to us, building us up, guiding our lives to always come back to Him, sometimes even shocking us with time in the extremes if only to show us yet again how much He loves us and how much we need Him.

If we read the first two verses alone, there is good and useful meaning in them. But looking at all three as a whole is really when we get the full picture of how God wants us to experience life carefully, in Him, and fully. Sometimes that means getting close to the white lines, and sometimes we even go over them. Isn't it good to know, then, that when we do there is always a lifeline back?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 September 2012

Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 19.

Ten rulers in a city? What city is ruled well when there are ten rulers? I'm not a fan of managing by consensus. Lady Thatcher who once said that "consensus is the absence of leadership." 100% agreed. Any city, indeed any organization, run by committee instead of a leader is bound to be dysfunctional at some point. If a city had 10 rulers instead of just a mayor or manager, I'd bet that city has trouble getting the trash picked up.

That's not to say, though, that teamwork is unimportant. Indeed, a team is critical, even Scriptural. And any leader worth their salt knows this. Good leaders work to build consensus, but aren't hamstrung by consensus (or lack of it). Moses asked for help and God gave him a team of judges, priests and assistants. The ancient kings of Israel ruled with advisors and priests administering the kingdom. Christ had those twelve men who He mentored. After He died, those guys played important roles, you know.

As a short term proposition, consensus leadership is a good idea, especially in groups where leaders haven't emerged. On every possible issue, good leaders and managers try to build consensus...but they also don't abdicate their responsibilities as decision-makers. Moses was still God's chosen deliverer and he didn't sit around saying "ok, men, let's take a vote." The king was still the king; he didn't relinquish that power. There is nobody else but Christ, and while Christ was encouraged to see His work carried out by others, never once did He shy away from his role as Savior leader. It's important to build a team, but no good leader should ever think he should delegate all his authority or power to the group. Teams play ball when there is a quarterback in the huddle. The ship sails smoothly with a captain at the tiller. It's a wise thing for one man to be in a position of Godly leadership. We should be careful who we choose, right? Not every leader is wise and not every wise person is a leader.

And yet it's a Godly, pre-ordained thing that a wise leader should be better at leading than a team, council, leadership team, committee, or Politburo. If you study history, you see that it's a miracle the Americans ever won the American Revolution. There was no Constitutional republic, no single president or powerful central government. The war was led and managed by the Continental Congress, many of whom jockeyed for position and many of whom thought they knew better how to fight a war than General Washington.

So it is with our churches. So it is with our families. So it is with our work teams, mission teams, football teams, and any other kind of group you can think of. Nobody likes to serve or work with a dictator, a know-it-all, or an overbearing lead. But nobody likes to serve with a weakling in charge either. Leaders need to be good listeners, talented and skillful at vocation, and decisive. Leaders do indeed seek the counsel of others, even building support and consensus for the direction in which they wish to lead the group. Most of all, leaders need to humbly submit themselves to the rule of God, our mutual leader. Real wisdom comes only from God, and real wisdom is an empowering thing.

We watched the season opener for Sons of Anarchy over the weekend. It's a brutal show about motorcycle gangs, and the struggle at the end of last season was a change in leadership. It made for compelling television, and this season promises to be equally good. Last night, I watched the Denver Broncos' new quarterback, Peyton Manning, struggle to lead his team and find a rhythm in a disorganized muddle of Monday Night Football. When I left the game, Atlanta was ahead 20-0. This morning, I see that Manning, great leader he is, rallied his team back to at least challenge the Falcons even though they lost in the end. Even great leaders sometimes pay for early mistakes (and Manning made quite a few in the first quarter). Yesterday, I was in a meeting where we project members from two teams divided up the responsibilities for two projects that, together, are worth over \$20 million to my client.

What do these things have in common? Leadership. At some point in every endeavor, someone needs to stand and lead. Today's verse says that a wise leader is more powerful, more influential to his group in the

ways of the Lord, than ten other good and strong men of ruling virtue. Think about that today when you go to work, get down to business, or wherever your day takes you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 19 September 2012

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 20.

Such a simple truth, and it's one that so many of us wrestle with. What about Mother Theresa? What about John Paul II? What about the single mother who raises three kids and sends them all to college selling snow cones? What about my dear grandmother who was the sweetest person I've ever known, who rarely knew real happiness while giving her all for others?

Damn dirty sinners is what they all are or were. So am I. So are you.

Romans 3:23 says it best: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That's one of the Bible verses that I think everyone should memorize; it's one of the few I have. Sure, there are those of us who live more upright lives than others, and there are billions who live more upright lives than me. But ALL of us – every single one – is born inclined to sin and indulges that inclination throughout life. I do my best, but I fall short more than I succeed.

There was a man named Mr. Edwards who was one of the more upright, pious, and faithful men I've ever known. He was an elder in the church where I was confirmed, and he was a good role model for impressionable young men growing up in the 1970s. When I think of someone who is righteous, Bill Edwards' face comes to my mind. He died a few years ago, well up into his 90s. I'm sure I'll get to see Mr. Edwards again in heaven because he was a strong believer, but you know what? While he was here, he was still a dirty sinner. Try as he did, he still did not do everything 'right' at least not where 'right' is measured by the Almighty.

If you're a believer, that is, if you accept what God in Christ did for you in removing your sins from your life, then you're redeemed, saved, made righteous and justified. When God looks at you, he sees the purity that is His Son Jesus. Yet here's a fact: YOU are still you. Without the covering of Christ, you alone are still a sinner. You might be a woman, a believer, a football fan, a mom, a friend, a consultant, a Republican (or a Democrat), a tall person or a midget. You might be you and I am me. We are all those things just by the virtue of who we are and what we choose. But we are also still sinners, people in need of redemption. There is nobody here on this planet who isn't. In fact, with a true and truly desiring thought, you can be baptized one minute, and if you walk out of the river and on the way think "oh no, why did SHE show up here," guess what? Sin. Or if you think badly of the guy next to you at the stop light. Or if you pray and then immediately doubt. All sin. That's why we need forgiveness. We need it as much as we need air, water, food, or any basic physical need for survival.

By living life through Christ, none of those sins matter any more. If this verse and Romans 3:23 talk about how all of us are sinners then don't forget that Romans 3:24 then says "and (all) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." And Romans 8 tells of how nothing of this world, in this world, or about this world can separate Him from you. When God looks at you, he doesn't see a sinner. He sees you through the perfection of His Son, and your sins don't matter. You've done them, they're part of your past. He erases the eternal penalty for them and they need not define you any longer. God sees you through His lens and sees only someone loved and made righteous again, as we were intended to be.

If wisdom makes one man more powerful than ten who rule a city, then this is the most powerful wisdom of all. This is the difference between life and death, between the temporal and the eternal. And it's true for you, me, Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul (both I and II), the snow cone lady, and my dear grandmother. All of us are sinners; it's in our nature and the verse is true. That sin is cleansed from our souls, though, by the whitening blood of Christ. And that's the best news you'll hear all day.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 20 September 2012

Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you — for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. Ecclesiastes 7, verses 21 and 22.

These verses come after the one where God talked about how we are all sinners, that as humans nobody is immune even as we are remade in spirit by Him. That's no coincidence. This is a good reminder of why that's true and it's a reminder that I especially needed to hear today; I hope you do too. Here are a few examples from the last 24 hours of my life.

Yesterday morning I got in an online discussion with a couple of friends about whether or not we are sinners. Their point was that because we are reborn as saints by Christ's sacrifice, we are no longer sinners. We actually agreed on many points but disagreed on the basic idea that we, as people, are still sinners even after we're redeemed. As mentioned, our spiritual nature is transformed, but in our human nature of the flesh we are still very much sinners and tempted; this was our point of disagreement. I kept trying to make a point, and the point I tried to make I made badly. Something (maybe the internet) came between our mutual understanding. That's a problem I see with talking online, especially via social media. It's too easy to parse things or misread someone's words even as they're plainly written. We miss the inflection, non verbals, and other important parts of communication. In this case, we missed a common but crucial mutual peace even as we really weren't very far apart. At the end of the debate, I don't think we agreed on the basic premise. I didn't curse them and they didn't curse me...but I don't think it would have taken much for either of us. Before much longer, pride would have come into play, and that's thin ice. Again, another danger of communicating online. Got internet? Probably got sin. Maybe it's best to walk away from the conversation if it isn't going to build someone up.

A few hours later, I watched as two other friends had a different Facebook debate about a different subject. I stayed out of it, mainly because I couldn't access Facebook from where I was. If I'd been able to, I probably would have jumped in. My friends were mostly civil, but there were a few jabs thrown in here and there for good measure. Later, when I got back to my hotel room, I joined in the fracas. Again, we were mostly civil, but I found myself quite exasperated in debating a good friend whose views are on the aisle opposite to mine. There wasn't any cursing or name calling; I don't allow it on my online page when we're debating. But it was nip & tuck there for awhile for both of us. Got debate? Probably got sin. Again, maybe it's best to walk away from the conversation if it isn't going to build someone up.

And then there is the election. I'm a political junkie, but even I find it frustrating. Both sides of the argument are loud, think we are principled, and are quite insistent. I watch several channels of news programs, read different newspapers, and listen to talk radio quite often. How many times have I cursed the people on the other side for espousing what I think are mind-numbingly stupid ideas? More than I can count. Does it make a difference? Has anyone been convinced? Me, I'm firmly convinced of who I'm going to vote for, but more than that I'm convinced that it's frustrating. Got politics? GOT SIN! Definitely best to walk away from the conversation if it isn't going to build someone up.

Isn't that the point the verse is making? I can't blame it all on Satan. A friend of mine pointed out last weekend that we can't blame all our sins on the devil. Some of them are due to our just plain bad choices and defiant human nature. Because our human nature is sin, we should watch our words, and even watch what we listen to. We make bad choices and we stir up a lot of talk. Some of that talk isn't helpful, and some of it is downright harmful. So is some of what we hear. If we aren't careful, we may hear things that we really don't want to hear, things that tear down. We should be careful about the things we listen to because some of them might lead us down paths we'd do better to avoid.

See, too, that the verse isn't telling us to turn a blind eye. God's word never tells us to be willfully blind; this is the same Bible that tells us to be innocent but shrewd. Because the previous verse correctly identified us as sinners, this one reminds us to moderate our listening and thus our response so that we avoid further sin. All those times I thought badly of someone, even my loved ones, make me susceptible to further sin. We are free to choose to not be defined by that, instead being defined by God's redemption. Yet for that change to be

complete and bear good fruit may mean avoiding some of the conversations, some of the listening, some of the viewing, some of the reading, that occupied our lives before. That isn't harmfully ignoring something you know is bad: it's choosing to not be a part of it.

Today I'll try harder to do better. Today I'll focus on where God has me and what He's doing in my life. The finer points of Scripture I'll leave for another day, and the finer points of political discourse I'll leave to general irrelevancy. I'm flying home anyway, and I'd rather spend time with my family. Those are people I'd like to listen to. I can speak with my vote, with my friends, and with my faith, but it need not be every word or every moment. Today, as God gives me strength, I'll do better.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 21 September 2012

All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise" — but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound — who can discover it? So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. Ecclesiastes 7, verses 23 – 25.

The stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. Those words are 3000 years old yet isn't it true that they're more relative and applicable now than seemingly any other time in most of our lifetimes? Our world is on fire and large, fearsome change seems at hand. The Middle East is (literally) aflame and getting worse every day. War is at hand there and when it comes it will be devastating to the entire world. The US economy is in tatters and is getting worse, not better. Once we descend into the abyss of debt default and stagflation, a worldwide depression is likely to ensue with the outcome of it being terrifying.. The allied relationships that have kept relative peace in the world for the last one hundred years are fraying and who knows what, if anything, can be done to repair them or even forge new ones?

Illiteracy, disbelief and atheism, soaring rates of worldwide poverty, extreme government corruption and business cronyism, apathetic citizenry, violent crime, gang 'family' and violence, the threat of nuclear annihilation, general leadership incompetence, hyper inflation, and Jersey Shore (or Honey Boo Boo): what's to blame? The stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.

Sure, there's enough blame to go around for anyone who has somehow touched the problem but assigning blame (or even understanding the impact of wickedness and folly) doesn't answer the question: what are we going to do about it? We could continue the status quo, but that's the kind of thing that's gotten us to where we are now. We could institute radical change but that is a dangerous prospect. We could do nothing but the problems can't be ignored.

The best place to start is by having a little faith. Take it to God, no matter how big the problem. Take it to the man upstairs and ask for wisdom, His wisdom. By relying on human wisdom only, we are setting ourselves up for failure as the first verse of today implies. The last one hundred years alone were replete with examples of how millions died when we relied on human wisdom alone. We can be determined to be wise, sinless, intelligent, upright, or whatever you like, but without involving God it simply won't work. In relying on human wisdom, evil comes more naturally. When Christ said "apart from me you can do nothing," He wasn't kidding. No matter the challenge facing us, we need involvement from above.

Who can discover God's wisdom? That's the next challenge the verse presents. You and I aren't God. Only one man in all of history was fully man – complete with all temptations of the flesh including the free will to resist them – and fully God – complete with all power to resist those temptations by demonstrating his true and grace-filled love. You and I aren't Him. All the hope and change in the world won't change that hopeful fact. Who can discover God's wisdom? We aren't God and we can't ever be God, can't even ever be 'like' God. What we are is humans, gifted by God with His inspired Word in, among and through our very lives. Apart from Him we can do nothing; living in Him, we can do everything, including discover His wisdom. We won't be the authors of it, but we can be the living embodiments of it.

And when we begin to look at all things in life through the lens of God's knowledge, we see that looking at things in a human vein simply doesn't measure up. I love learning; I have three college degrees to prove that. All three of them are mostly worthless. I imagine standing before God one day and telling Him, "look, Lord, I earned associates, bachelors and masters degrees (maybe even that doctorate)." I think His response could be when He puts his arm around me and says, "that's nice, son, but do you love Me?" Science is a wonderful thing to discern how God's nature here functions, to learn the physical makeup of things. Since we are sentient beings, though, we know – we believe – that we are also beings of spirit, more than just physicality. Do you love me? That's the most profound question you can ask or be asked. Do you love someone? Do you love your parents, your children, you significant other, your job, your life? Do you love God? You say yes; we all do.

Here's the challenge: scientifically prove it. Prove love. Not the fruits of love, or the evidence of its existence; not the things that describe love or show what love does: prove love.

I'll cordially wish you 'good luck' with that. As a matter of the heart– of your spirit – you won't be able to without considering God. You want to prove love? Take a close look at the cross.

And when we see that, I think the difference between love and that stupidity / madness becomes clear. Without God, ALL of life is stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. Apart from Him we really can do nothing. Within him are knowledge and peace.

Today is the last day of summer. I can explain to you the specifics of the autumnal equinox, and the meteorological impact of the coming season. We can together learn about the dormancy of plants and animals in the northern hemisphere this year as well as the renewing and coming back of things in the southern. There are physiological changes that occur in all animals because of the impact of season, planetary inclination upon an axis, and proximity to the sun. Here again I imagine I hear the kind, understanding voice of God: "that's nice, son, but do you love Me?" Consider that love as we close out the summer and transition into fall.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 25 September 2012

I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 26.

What a sexist so & so! I can just hear it now: politically correct voices screaming how sexist this verse is. Obviously the man who wrote it must also be a sexist you-know-what. Stone age, cave man, bigoted sexist pig. Inbetween the self-indignant invective, I'm wondering if those unspoken voices miss the point.

I'm a man and I've been involved with women in my life and I'm here to say this verse is true. God doesn't need me to tell you that for it to be true because truth is truth. Truth isn't post-modern or relative: it is simply truth. Facts are facts and truth is what it is, and it has always been that way. Speaking as a man, and as one who has been involved where he shouldn't have, I'll easily agree with the verse. I wish I had taken the time to seriously consider this verse, these words, before I did some of the things I've done in life. Living in regret is useless, but regretting some things we've done can be healthy. I regret loving where I shouldn't have, hurting people I loved, and getting dragged into the mire. Would that I could blame it on 'her': the fault is mine alone. Only I'm responsible for my actions and my sins. Yet the verse is true that some people use their hearts like traps, ensnaring others and binding them in the name of love and affection. It happened to me; I let it happen. It can happen to you.

Solomon had dozens of wives. Sure, it was customary for Bronze Age Mesopotamia, but you really can't get around the fact that he may have also been a horny leech who just happened to be king. Several of those wives dragged him into sin, helping him to turn from God. Imagine it: you have an intensely personal relationship with the Almighty, who speaks with you directly and gives you His wisdom, something He had never done for anyone else. And you squander it. Your kingdom suffers because of your sins, but that hottie at the palace is better than all that so you don't turn from your idolatry. Go figure. Bible stories, eh?

Jim Bakker. John Edwards. Bill Clinton. Jimmy Swaggart. John F. Kennedy. None of them had a direct one-on-one relationship with God the way Solomon did and yet all of them publicly, flagrantly carried on affairs with women who ensnared them. Many other people were affected by that.

But lest we think it's all because of the women, what about the men? Hmm...how about a little country music? "Before He Cheats" by Carrie Underwood. "Guys Do It" by the troubled Ms Mindy McCready. "The Thunder Rolls," by Garth Brooks. "Does He Love You" by Reba McEntyre and Linda Davis (which also happens to have THE BEST ending to any video anywhere, hands-down). Is it just me or can men be as ensnaring as women? We're different but just as liable to be sinners. You already know that I've gone there. According to statistics, so do about half of all married men or even men in committed relationships. Ladies, get to know a man before you dive in deep. Over the weekend, we watched "Courageous" and there is a scene in the movie where a dad confronts his teenage daughter over her wish to date an older boy (who, as it turns out, is later busted after joining a gang). The father insists that the young man meet first with him before dating the daughter.

I have two daughters. We tried this and it didn't always work out (even though my future son-in-law is one of the best men I know). Daughters have minds of their own as I'm sure most people know. Still, if I had to do the dad-thing over again, I'd insist on this old-fashioned custom. Why? Because men will use their hearts like snares to trap women and get what they want (which usually involves sex). Why again? Because they learned it from women. And why, yet again, is that? Because we're sinners. It goes back to that 'stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly' thing that we discussed the other day. It goes back to the fact that, as humans, we're thick with the temptation to sin.

And, no, not all relationships are bad. Even when there are bad times, good can result from it. If I had to do my marriage all over again, I'd marry the same woman and do it again. We've been through some very tough times, including those affairs. Now that we're on the other side of all that, I thank God every day for the

blessings He gives me through her. She's my best friend, my confidante, my partner, and my wine-drinking pal. That and she loves football! I enjoy her company more than anyone else's on this planet because of more reasons than I could list here. Was her heart like a snare? No, not really, though she wasn't Joan of Arc either. For years I railed against things in our marriage, and only some of them were worth the fighting. But at the end of all that fighting, I found out that SHE was worth the fight and our future as husband and wife in God is happy, bright and fun.

Whether or not this verse is sexist or not really doesn't matter much. It says what it says and I agree with what it says. Here's hoping it's a truth that has good meaning for you today and that your heart is free of the snare while being blessed by the happiness of loving another.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 26 September 2012

"Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things — while I was still searching but not finding — I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." Ecclesiastes 7, verses 27 – 29.

Yep, another chauvinist verse from the chauvinist king, right? More sexism to prove that men have always been sexist pigs who only want to keep women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, right?

No, not quite.

I had to read through this a few times to figure out what it meant. That didn't help much, so I read through some commentaries online. The one with which I most closely agreed is at johnnybdaily.blogspot.com/2011/06/ecclesiastes-727-29-where-is-your.html. The short blog entry says, in a nutshell, "The point of Solomon's statement is not that women are unwise, but that hardly anyone, man or woman, is upright before God." Coming as it does – at the end of this particular chapter – that interpretation makes sense to me. It makes sense because of the word "mankind." That tells me that the verses are meant to apply to all of humanity, not just a particular gender. Sure, coming on the heels of the last verse – you know, that other one where Solomon talked about women being a snare – it's understandable that the King Solomon's opinion of women was limited by his experience and his choices. But it wasn't so limited that it obscured his understanding of what God meant him to say about everybody.

We are all sinners. Christ yearns, works and loves to transform our spirits to redeemed saints, but our nature as people is still inclined to sin. Those two are constantly at war, and as long as that war endures, we are not upright. Without the covering of Christ, we can't stand innocent before an upright, holy God. Without the covering of Christ, our lives are indeed without hope, chock a bock full of guilt, resigned to fall deeper into depravity.

One other thing I noticed about the verse is how Solomon's search for meaning is an ongoing thing. He was still searching but not finding. This was a life-long pursuit, this understanding of wisdom. Even with the gift of divine discerning, Solomon still sought out to understand 'why.' That's part of the beauty of wisdom, that it leaves us hungry to be more wise, to seek further wisdom that we might interpret it better. It is also the curse of humanity, that we may ever be hungry to want to know more.

Hand in hand with that hunger is that it is we who choose to follow the many schemes. God made us upright. From the beginning, from Eden, God made us as 'very good' and intended that we should remain so. He could be in full communion with us if we were 'very good' and holy. That changed with the fall. First the woman, then the man, and through him, all mankind. She chose the scheme, then her husband chose the same scheme. Maybe the verse is a subtle reference to original sin, that Eve sinned first and then tempted Adam to join her. Who was the weaker: the original sinner in woman or the man who gave in to woman's temptation?

In the end, it doesn't matter because you and I are still tempted by those same schemes. Yes, our sins vary by the severity of how they affect mankind but in the eyes of God you or I are no different from most diabolical murderer in history. We chose it; we still choose it. We choose it every time we give into those pet temptations. Mine is women; yours is gambling; your brother's is drinking; your kid's is swearing; your father's is stealing; your cousin's is envy; your neighbor wants someone dead. A sin is a sin is a sin. My cardinal sin is no different that Adam and Eve's simple idolatrous disobedience. It's the same for you. We're in the same gene pool; we're both mankind. We're in the same gene pool with the person who sees zero problem with holding onto their wrongs and causing even more.

I've mentioned here before that my son and I (and now my wife) enjoy "The Walking Dead." If you aren't familiar with the show, it's about life in Georgia after a zombie apocalypse. The living survivors are (literally)

just trying to stay alive, and the show is about them and their struggle. Most of the characters are (what we would consider in a 'normal' world) every-day people. A sheriff's deputy and his wife & son, a veterinarian, an attorney, a housewife, college students, a trucker, a hunter...and a rabid white supremacist (who is returning in the coming season): they're all thrown together just trying to stay alive. Their sins are our sins. The innocent child is the deputy is the housewife is the redneck who hates people because of their skin. I am you and you are me. We are all in the same world; we are all mankind. We were all made to be upright but we aren't, so we are all intended to be redeemed, bought back, and transformed in mind, spirit and body. That, too, is a common fact of mankind.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 8 October 2012

Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 1.

Welcome back! I hope you're having a radically great day! I took a few days off after concluding chapter seven. To be honest, I needed some time away. Read back on the words and you'll see I was getting a little sideways, a bit ragged around the edges. We all get like that, now and then, when we keep adding to our daily to-do lists and forget to pay attention to the things that matter most. One of the last things I mentioned in that previous post was about how my son and I enjoy "The Walking Dead" (which, by the way, premieres season three next week!). After a few busy months, I felt a little like a zombie.

And at the start of what promises to be a very busy season, thanks to a few days away, I feel a bit less zombie-like. I've been blessed with four extremely productive and successful weeks at my client in Minnesota. Last weekend, I met my wife in Washington where we attended my niece's wedding and had the best time we've had in years. To make that happen, I rented a car and drove 5100 miles round trip, seeing family on the way and enjoying the glory of God's changing autumn colors. And just yesterday we had a family day at Chez Terry, with church, family pictures (that turned out GREAT), and a steak dinner with the people I love most.

Who's to thank for all these wonderful things? Me, because I made that really long drive? My family, because they took time to all come together? My wife, because she's the most patient person I know? Or God? Yep. You know the answer.

My ego would love for you to massage it and pile on all kinds of kind words, accolades, and 'good for you's.' That would make you look obsequious and me small, however. I'm not wise. I can't explain much. The real truth of saying all these things is that it really isn't about me. In fact, it isn't about me at all. It's about God. God in Christ; three in one; Alpha and Omega and everything in-between.

When you realize that, your face can be changed. What does that really mean? Well...

...you've known people with a hard edge, haven't you? There are folks in your life who are tough. Experience, time, outlook, life have made them tough on the outside. They're like weathered stone: a bit smoothed around the edges but still rock hard, cold and heavy. It's a generalization, but I think that choices have made them that way, most of those choices being bad ones, unwise ones. It's not your fault if a meteor hits your house, a car runs over your dog, or some other kind of terrible thing happens in your life. How you and I react to those things, though, is our responsibility. We can become bitter or we can let it build faith. You and I have both known too many people who have become bitter. While that bitterness is understandable, it's also true that they own it. That in itself is a hard thing to say.

God can change that around. God's knowledge is founded in his unending love, and his unending love is true justice and real wisdom. When I learned to see things through God's wisdom, I learned that most important lesson: it's not about me. I also learned that looking at things through His lenses makes them seem clearer, more in focus. I'm able to better discern what's right and wrong and where He wants me to stick to the right. What's more, when I do that wrong – and that's way too often to duck – His wisdom brings me up short and demands an answer. God's loving wisdom is justice, both when I have erred and when others have erred to me. When He changes things around, though, He doesn't promise a rose garden. He promises Himself.

So I'm reading a book: Radical, by David Platt. If you like your church, if you feel glad for your faith, if you feel blessed and hopeful in what you know, and if you think you are channeled into God's wisdom, I challenge you to read this book. Platt, a minister to a mega-church in Birmingham, Alabama, spends most of the book throwing acid on our conventional wisdom about church. His contention is that we've lost our understanding of the wisdom of God because we've thrown over His Son to make Him into something He isn't. Platt isn't negative; he isn't mean: he is scathing and radically, brutally, Biblically honest about what it means to say "I

believe in Jesus.” To follow Christ means to follow a radical, and to be a radical in the face of a world that will either beat you down for it or try to get you to turn from it (or both). Can you be a wise man, able to explain things and not have a cold, hard edge while professing to win souls for God? David Platt thinks so because that’s what the radical Christ did and does every day.

Coming back to write these verses after a few days away, that’s something I would like to keep in mind. I’d like to keep that idea of being radical in my profession no matter where it takes me or what it costs. I’ve been given so many blessings in my life and I’m thankful to be able to talk about them with you. The greatest of those blessings is the growing presence of God in my life, helping me to turn from the old ways and be hopeful in living today. As He helps me, He’s teaching me to not be a walking zombie, but instead to be a radical witness. Where this takes me, I really don’t know. I simply trust that it is the wise course to follow and that all the stops along the way will be memorable.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 9 October 2012

Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 2.

Are we people of our word? An oath before God is a good old fashioned thing, but does it matter today as much as it did in years past? Society doesn't seem to think so. If you think about it, keeping your word sort of runs contrary to nature. Other animals don't give their word; they simply do what they do. Keeping your word actually seems like a little bit of insanity.

Who's to blame for this? We can't blame the Baby Boomers: other generations lost sight of what's moral and right as well. Sure, maybe they're the most prominent generation in American history, but we can't blame the ebbing morality all on them. They couldn't have done what they did if it hadn't been allowed by others.

You can't blame all the woes of popular culture on Hollywood and politics because those things reflect what we allow. Lasciviousness is nothing new for Tinseltown. Not long ago I read yet another book about silent movie era Hollywood. Let's put it this way: Brangelina, Lindsay and the rest of today's crop of bad boy/bad girl glitterati have nothing on their forebears from a hundred years ago. Quickie marriages and quickie divorces are nothing new out on the west coast any more than they're anything new in the rest of the country. It's a sad admission, but Hollywood doesn't set the trends in our country: it reflects them. We the people are the ones who buy the tickets, and 'they' the movie stars won't make movies that we won't attend. Hollywood does things that the rest of us tacitly approve of. We let them do what they do because we're watching, because we do them too.

And Bill Clinton didn't invent the horny, lewd politician. He simply legitimized him in a way that his predecessors in power never had. Fourteen years have passed since Clinton's impeachment split the country along ideological lines yet again. As you remember, the president was impeached for trying to fix a sexual harassment case, for committing perjury, which dragged out a whole basket of dirty laundry while splitting the country down party lines. Why did it happen? Simple sin. Why did that sin happen? Because Clinton broke his oath. We let him do it. Sure, he chose, but we let it happen. We didn't help him be a better man. If I ever meet Clinton, I may just say "I understand." I've done it too.

News flash: so have you. Even if you have never cheated on your spouse, you've broken your oaths. Even if you've never stolen a car, you have broken your oath to live upright. Even if you've never killed anyone, you've broken an oath to not get angry. What's more, you've broken oaths you took before God. "Wait, Dave," you may be saying. "I never took an oath before God. I never stood in church and said 'yes, I will' or anything like that!" My friend, if you said "I will" to anything in this life and then broke your word in doing it, you've violated an oath before God.

ALL our oaths are before God. Even when we make small promises, minor commitments, or say things to get people off our back, we're making those oaths before God. Sure, some have more consequence than others, i.e. things like marriage vows, legal testimony, or swearing into office or the military. But the radical truth is that every time we make an oath or a promise, we're doing so in front of God. God is everywhere, even where we don't think He's present. When you tell a little kid that you'll read a story or take him fishing some day, you're not just making a promise you might not intend to keep: you're swearing an oath. We can't profess that God is both omnipotent and omniscient and then say "yeah, but He isn't here with me right now." He is. As you're reading these words, God is with you. He will be with you when you're done, driving your car, in your bathroom, at the office, when you sleep, or the next time you watch the New York Jets lose a football game.

In those times, God wants us to keep our word no matter what. He does; why can't we? The author of today's verse was a king, so it's easy for him to say "obey the king's command," right? If you think that's all there is to it, I'm afraid you missed the point. Solomon was one of the wealthiest, most powerful kings of antiquity, yet even he knew that he was a subject before God. He understood that the source of his power wasn't himself. I wonder if our politicians would say and do half the things they do if they remembered that their role is to govern

under our Constitution and our laws to protect our liberties; I wonder what they would say and do if they realized they're accountable to God before being accountable to an electorate.

I wonder what you and I would do with our lives if WE remembered that more often. I know that I would get into far less trouble. I know I'd be a better man of my word.

Those oaths are sticky things, you know. The fact is, however, that nobody forced us to take them. The same is true here and now. Nobody makes us say what we say or swear the things we swear. There is no coercion; there is nothing forced. When I say I'm going to do something at work and I don't do it, unless my work is re-prioritized, I need to do what I said I'd do. When I promise my son I'll spend time with him and I don't, I've broken my vow to him. When I resolve to think Godly thoughts and I don't, I've broken my vow to God. When I've made a new year's resolution and I abandon it, I've broken my vow. Sticky things, right?

Yesterday, five of the six members of my immediate family started the "Insanity" exercise regimen. Member number six is already doing the same kind of workouts in wrestling, so we're cutting him some slack. This is going to be a hard vow to keep because I'm really sore this morning. In less than sixty days, my oldest daughter is getting married and we all want to be fitter, thinner, and be in better shape, so we're each carving out a half hour or so every day to do these crazy exercises. We've resolved and promised to do them; we've taken vows. No, those vows aren't of the gravity of those December wedding vows, of the vow I would take if I were swearing testimony in court, or of a promise to my boss. But they're vows all the same. The King of all Eternity about whom and through whom and because of whom all things happen has told me to obey His command and keep my word. He keeps His; so must I. I'm thinking that, for the next few days, I'm going to be sore from doing Insanity. Here's to hoping that's a good reminder of not just building strength but also a reminder of being a better man of my word.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 10 October 2012

Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 3.

The New Living Translation of the Bible translates verse 3 like this: "Don't try to avoid doing your duty, and don't stand with those who plot evil, for the king can do whatever he wants." I like that translation. It closest fits what I think the verse is saying from antiquity. If nothing else, the translation is easy to understand for a modern non-scholar such as myself.

Duty, honor, country. Those three words were best epitomized in a speech that Douglas MacArthur gave to West Point cadets in 1962. It was the last major address he gave; his health was declining, and two years later he died. MacArthur knew a thing or two about duty. Though his ego was the size of Montana, MacArthur never shirked from doing his duty. Three times he was nominated for the Medal of Honor, being awarded it on that third. His exceptional and defiant bravery during World War I, the strategy of island hopping that gradually squeezed the empire of Japan, his brilliance in devising the turn-around invasion of Inchon, and his continuous dedication to the Army he loved: all were driven by his constant focus on duty, honor and country. Especially the duty part. It was only when he overstepped his bounds of defining that duty that MacArthur ran into trouble, running up against a president (Truman) whose stubborn backbone was as tough as MacArthur's own dedication to the duty he saw fit.

Those three words are words each of us would do well to remember: duty, honor, country. What's unspoken is that the glue which holds them all together is faith in God. Without faith, duty is meaningless. Without faith, honor is dishonorable. Without faith, there is no country. Faith binds them together, infuses them with meaning, makes them words of admiration. Without faith in God, duty, honor, and country are little more than nice words in a history book. Cadets at West Point have learned this for nearly 200 years.

You don't have to be a soldier, sailor, airman or veteran to understand that. Whatever your duty is, when you do it, you know you've done the right thing. It's intuitive; you simply know it, feel it, understand it. When you do your duty whether it's standing watch, folding laundry, finishing homework, or exercising in Insanity, you know you've done a good thing. When you do your duty, you're submitting to something bigger, maybe nobler, than yourself. You're serving. People who do their duty are serving. It goes to say that those who don't do their duty aren't really serving, are they?

Ditto for standing against evil. When you stand against evil, when you resist temptation, you know you've done the right thing. When you don't? Guilt. We all plot evil, and the deceiver is always looking for a way to rope us into doing so. When we resolve to not sin, to not carry evil forward, we stand for what is good and right. Large battles are won with small gallantry, and it is a gallant thing to stand up in small ways to the petty evil that we encounter every day. When we do that, we uphold duty and honor, maybe even country. We stand with God. MacArthur would understand that.

Why do these things? Because the ultimate King is watching. The King, the REAL King, is all-knowing. He knows your score; He sees you where you are. He is and was in all our lives just as he was in MacArthur's (and the lives of his men). God is not impartial or uninvolved in our lives, even when we can't see it. It is God to whom we dedicate duty, honor, and country. It is God who ennobles those things, making them worthwhile standards to live by.

General MacArthur was an old fashioned man who served in two world wars that bridged the age from fighting on horseback to threatening nuclear war. He was born in 1880 in an old Army post in Arkansas. His father (himself a Medal of Honor winner) had fought in the Civil War, in the 1880s Indian Wars, and in the mostly forgotten Spanish American War of 1898. Young MacArthur grew up on the frontier, then in the east, and was nurtured in duty, honor and country at a time when those three words were the highest ideal for anyone. Avoiding duty and not standing against evil would have been antithetical to the man who grew up in the late

1800s. Sixty years later, when he gave that farewell speech at West Point, the general looked back on his life and acknowledged that duty, honor, and country had been the things that always gave him strength to lead, make war, and win on the side of right instead of the side of tyranny. So it was the General Macarthur fifty years ago, so it is with us today because the King of Kings is still king, still with us, and still watching from near and far.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 October 2012

Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" Ecclesiastes 8, verse 4.

Just before I went into the Air Force, both my mom and my dad gave me some advice: don't buck the system because the system is bigger than you. You can imagine how I reacted to that. I mean, me: I'm a stubborn, independent, bull-headed individual. I know what I know and I trust what I know. Sometimes, I KNOW better than the system, so whaddaya mean don't buck it because it's bigger than me?

Let me repeat the advice again: don't buck the system because the system is bigger than you. If you read it one more time, then re-read today's verse, I think you'll find my parents' advice is a kind of derivative of the verse. No wonder it has served me well.

Yesterday, I was in a meeting with senior vice presidents and C-level officers of the company that is my current client. We were officially kicking off a new project I'm managing. In a way, because I'm the project manager (PM) I'm the big cheese. I'm the king of the project, if you want to look at it a certain way (but I think reality will shed a different light). My word is some kind of supreme in that I'm the decision maker and the facilitator for helping other people get their tasks done. The reality of the situation is that a successful manager usually does so more by serving than by directing. Yet that also doesn't change the fact that my talent and experience have earned this position, that they've hired me for my leadership and management skills and that I have to be good at my job just to be able to be a part of the big group. Go me, right?

While patting myself on the back for becoming a PM (yet again), I looked around and realized I was a small fish in a big pond. I was in the meeting with a group of three other senior vice presidents, a CIO, a chief medical officer, and a host of other senior managers like myself. Who was I kidding: I wasn't king of anything. I am but a captain in a room full of generals. These folks are paying me to do what I do but NOT to have a big head about it. My job won't get done without the input of many other people, and I can't have decisions executed without serving the needs of others. Project management isn't about being in charge: it's about serving in interdependence. I've known this for years. It's an essential part of learning to be an NCO in the military, and it's simply common sense.

All the while, my parents' advice is repeating in my mind. This is how the system works. This is how a project is managed, how work gets done. Things are done the way they're done for a reason. Methodology and process are meaningful and can minimize waste and mistakes if they're sensibly executed. Don't buck the system. The system is bigger than you.

In light of yesterday's verse (about doing one's duty and not standing up to the king), seeing my role in the context of serving others, the idea of being the big cheese in charge doesn't really mean a lot. Who can say to the king in charge 'what are you doing?' It turns out that, in an inter-connected world, a great many people can. CEOs report to stock holders; directors report to company officers; managers report to directors; employees report to managers; husbands report to wives (and, to be fair, vice versa). Election Day is less than a month away. In America, even the president must report to the voters. Who can say to you 'what are you doing?' It turns out quite a few people.

Especially God. Especially God because God is the king over everything; the king of last resort. He repeatedly leads but calls us up short on our shortcomings. God of our fathers whose almighty hand leads forth in beauty all the starry band. That's what the hymn said. The God of our fathers is over all we think, see and do. He's over the president, the voters, the CEO, and the steelworker. He's over my project. How well do you think it would work if I stood up to God and said "what are you doing?" Think Job. Think insignificant. Think the Mexican proverb (if you want to hear God laugh tell Him your plans). Think the amoeba talking to the redwood. Think it would be me shirking my duty and trying to tell the Master what He messed up in the world He created to be good and very good.

Think about not bucking the system because, in this case, the system knows what it's doing.

And God's system isn't unjust. We can have the debate about what to do if the system is unjust, if it's illegal, immoral or just wrong. But that's a slippery slope, you know, and not one into which we should enter lightly. If we question the system and our WWJD question can be addressed favorably, well, then maybe it's a good idea to not buck the system after all.

We'll save that for another day. Instead, let's move on faith and trust that God is leading well.

For now, I'll go to work today and get down to brass tacks managing my project. Where is God leading me today, what minutiae of tasks need to be done and who do I need to contact for A information, B work, and C scheduled meeting? Through it, there will be issues, decisions, problems, successes, failures, roadblocks, challenges, wins, and coffee. In other words, it'll be a normal day full of extraordinary things. When living out our lives with the King, I find more and more that I don't need to question Him on what He's doing. I simply find happiness in doing my best, doing my part, and doing the work set before me for someone greater than myself. THAT is the stuff at the center of leadership. I don't need to buck His system since His system is bigger and better than me. He knows what He's doing.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12 October 2012

Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him. Ecclesiastes 8, verses 5 and 6.

I think that a good way to interpret this verse is to remember that, in Ecclesiastes 3, God said "for everything there is a time." Throughout the four verses previous to this one, God is saying that we should keep our words, remember our oaths, and understand our duty. With this verse, He is saying something a bit more.

Whoever follows the orders of those appointed over him usually comes to success. Success is a matter of training, discipline, and execution. Attitude, background, endeavor, and perseverance (as well as perspiration) are all brought to bear in doing our duty as directed by those above us. Don't buck the system because it's bigger than you. Why is that? Why do we come to no harm?

Maybe it's a matter of psychological conditioning. Do it right, get rewarded. Push the button, get the banana pellet. It's training and conditioning, demand and response. But that doesn't factor in obedience, which is an attitude. It trains behavior but says nothing about why that behavior is desirable.

So maybe it's fear. Fear those in charge and do what they want you to do because, if you don't, they can thump you. Throughout history, that's what kings have done. There is indeed a proper time for every matter, namely it's taking care of those matters when you're told because you're going to get in BIG trouble if you don't. It's all about intimidation. No, that isn't it. Fear doesn't explain why good people stand up to intimidation. Fear doesn't explain when good people go to work day after day and actually enjoy their jobs. Fear doesn't explain people sacrificing for others, for their families, for little or no gain. No, it isn't fear.

So maybe it's because that's how the Almighty designed it. I've always heard that, the more you study Scripture, the more you see how it all fits together, and in this verse I see that. As mentioned, I think that Ecclesiastes 3 helps to amplify and understand Ecclesiastes 8. For everything there is a time, and there is a time to obey orders and do our duty. Those times are set and controlled by God, who is the ultimate king and the ultimate source of real justice. We live under that justice; much as the atheists try to deny it, even they live under God with the rest of us. That's simply a fact of life.

What about that 'man's misery weighs heavily on him' part? Well that's true isn't it? You could interpret that to mean that life is a drudgery, and sometimes it feels like it is. I think you could also interpret it to be a reflection of doing our duty: doing things we might not want to do despite anything else we have on our plate. And I think you could reasonably also interpret it to mean doing our duty is the proper thing to do despite those things on our plate, which is slightly different than what the last statement said.

But no matter how you interpret it, I keep coming back to the holistic nature of the thing. It fits together. This book fits with the Proverbs, which fit with the Beatitudes, which reflect the Law and Jewish customs outlined in Exodus through Deuteronomy, which reflect the history of the Jewish people in most of the Old Testament, which is reflected in the letters of the Apostles in the New. Which are inspired by the foundation that is the Gospels. Which is an explanation of God's unending love. Which is Christ. The whole thing fits together and serves to explain not only our behavior under authority but also our motivations for wanting to behave that way. It's a law thing, it's a gospel thing. It's a tradition thing, it's an untraditional thing. It's a human nature thing, and it's especially a Jesus saves thing.

And no matter how you interpret it, THAT is a very good thing.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 16 October 2012

Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 7.

Do you spend much time wondering about what's in your future? I used to. In fact, I used to spend quite a lot of time alone thinking about things I wanted, or dreaming about things I would like to do or have. The farm dream was one of my favorites. I've lived most of my life in the city or the suburbs, and I've never lived on a farm. But I have always wanted to. The thought of living someplace where it is quiet and peaceful, where you can get up in the morning and smell the land; the thought of raising animals and vegetables, maybe owning an orchard or a vineyard; the idea of working hard on something I raised then selling good food to people: heaven to me. In fact, I kind of hope that my eternity involves living that way, living on a farm someplace and working the land for Him above.

Will that ever happen? I have no idea. Really don't. The dream is a great pastime, one that distracts from the way things are and replaces them with the way that I wish things could be. Is that really helpful, though? Will it happen? I really don't know.

Do you? Yeah, I didn't think so. Please don't feel bad. Just join the crowd with the rest of us who are doing our best to live in the present. We're supposed to live today, not in regret over yesterday or all constipated over what might or might not happen tomorrow.

I get a chuckle when my kids tell me "Gretchen thinks..." or "I know Sammie is gonna..." or "Dillon wants to..." as if they can tell the future. They're mind-readers, and they can tell what their siblings are thinking or what will happen in the next five minutes. As I have grown as a parent, I've had to remind myself that I'm not a mind-reader either, and while it's sometimes helpful to be able to predict what people will do, by and large, I don't know what my kids (or anyone) are thinking or planning any more than they do. Whether you're talking about political polls, sports picks, trying to predict how the PTA will vote, or what your spouse will say when you tell them that you want to buy a mushroom farm in Oregon, you probably don't really know what they'll say or how they'll react. You're really only able to make educated guesses.

Welcome to living in grace. We're living in the world our Maker created for us, where we don't have access to the Tree of Life because our ancestors already chose the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We chose to try to be better than God and we continually make that same choice. It's simply part of our nature now. Part of that means not knowing really what's up ahead. If you think about it, that's a good thing.

In this verse, I like the comparison over controlling the wind versus controlling death. You & I have each known plenty of people who worried about death. Remember the movie "Moonstruck," where Olympia Dukakis' character is trying to figure out why her husband is straying? She spends the entire movie asking men in her life "why do men cheat," wanting to hear them say "because they fear death." Isn't that the truth, though (or at least an understandable explanation of a primary motivation)? Isn't that the way it has been since the Garden of Eden? We chose sin, and because we're conscious of the penalty for sin, we choose more of it, thinking we can evade that penalty. That choice ends up being a whole bunch of nothing. Just as we can't bottle the wind, so we can't bottle the time of our death. Only God knows where and when each of them blow through our lives.

Here's the good news: you and I don't need to worry about tomorrow. Christ exhorted his followers to not worry, to not make worrying about what could be more important than faith in He who is here and now. Years before that, He inspired Solomon to record that "whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure." Do not worry about what might happen. Simply obey God's commands to love Him fully and live out that love in whatever we do. Don't worry about death because He already defeated death. What we couldn't do because of that long-ago choice, He did and undid the spiritual damnation that was the ultimate penalty. There's no need to worry about it.

No, I don't spend much time day-dreaming these days. This fall is busy in my house anyway. My wife and I have been working long hours, earning up time and money to pay for our daughter's wedding this December. We're trying to be more actively engaged in our kids' lives now that they're mostly grown. Our heads are in the here and now while doing our best to prepare for tomorrow. That preparation thankfully doesn't involve worrying about it because we both know we have faith and that we're doing our best. Sure, there are frustrating times when her work is overwhelming, my work out of state is difficult, and the money tree seems to have dropped all its leaves earlier this year when we really wanted a later harvest. Earlier this month I drove across country, logging five thousand miles in just under two weeks for family time and work alike. I didn't spend much time day-dreaming, though, or self-talking my way through plans I desire for a home by a lake or a farm in the country. My business was more at hand, in the there and then...just as today will be in the here and now. I have faith that God is with me and that he's blessed and prepared me for whatever comes my way in life, good or bad.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 17 October 2012

No man has power over the wind to contain it so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 8.

Yesterday we previewed part of verse 8, talking about how nobody has the power to control when they die. Not even suicidal people are in really control of the time they are to die. As life is a gift from God, the withdrawal of that life is also an action under His governance. Cease the functioning of the body, of the receptacle that contains life but you don't extinguish the life itself. This is a semantic point but an important one.

It's important because death is the ultimate punishment for wickedness. All sin is wicked; all disobedience is rebellion; all anger is murder; all envy is theft; all adultery starts in the heart. See what I mean? All sin is wicked and the bad news is that we're thick with it. Because of that, we will die. You and I are going to die. It's not just a mortal death that's promised, though. The death that is promised for unrepentant sin is spiritual death, torture of the spirit life that lives in you long after the deeds you and I did are ancient history. God is holy. Our sins aren't. Without a way back to Him, to be part of His holiness, you and I are doomed and damned. Unfair? What is fair? Instead of asking about fair, maybe we should ask about the nature of sin and why we would ever want to cling to it instead of the Spirit of God.

The analogy verse 8 serves is that it would unthinkable in a time of war for a soldier in combat to be discharged. What? It happens all the time, even during combat operations in Afghanistan. Want to know the dirty little secret about that? When you enlist, you sign over all your rights to serve for a pre-ordained period of time. Because you sign and swear the oath, you submit to the authority of the US Government that, if they so desire, in time of war the military can keep you as long as it likes or needs to. By the end of the Civil War, Army service had become so, and it was revived for both the First and Second World Wars. Veterans can check their enlistment papers and that legal codicil is present.

When your country needs you, it's unthinkable that you won't be available because, if you're already in service, you can be compelled to stay. So it is with the realm of sin. When we choose the sin, we sign over our eternal rights to life. When you're in the grip of it, the sin won't let you go. Take it from my experience: you can't just dabble in sin. You can't just rationalize and think "just this once." That isn't how the game is played. When sin grabs a hold of you, it will not release you.

But notice something that the verse says: "those who practice it." While writing this I didn't have access to alternate translations, so I'll say that, linguistically speaking, perhaps 'practice' has a dual meaning here. You practice in preparation for the real thing, and that certainly applies to our sins as they generally sequence from bad to worse. We practice to hone our skills, and in sin that can lead to more and more depravity just as healthy practice can lead to greater and greater skill. We also 'practice' as in 'practicing medicine' or 'practicing law.' When we practice, we are in a chosen vocation. We are doing something we choose to do, something which we selected to do from among our many choices in life.

Where sin is concerned, we can choose to not do it. You and I are free to choose to not sin. I didn't say it would be an easy choice to make or an easy one to live with. In your own experience, you know that's true because doing the right thing is often hard. But we can choose to not do them. We can choose to give up anger, to not murder, to refocus lust, to not disrobe into adultery, to refrain from stealing, to watch our words. We can do these things. The temptation is always there and always shape-shifting, but we can stand and resist. God gives us that power. It's available in Him 24/7. Our inherited nature is prone to sin, pre-disposed to it. Our justified nature is remade through God to turn aside the punishment for our sin and change it to something that can live with God forever.

We're free to do this. God saw to that. He chose to make us free, to unburden us from the holy penalty for our wickedness that is spiritual death. We physically sin in this life so we physically depart from it as well. The life, however, is the spirit, and the spirit is a gift of His Spirit. We can't extinguish that. Only God can. And instead of

choosing eternal spiritual death for us, He chose to renew our spirit and impart His own to us forever. All we have to do is honestly believe. He paid the debt for the wrongs we do so that wickedness need not grip us because it has been rendered moot. Over the saved, wickedness has no control. Kill the body but the spirit endures. One day, at His good and proper time, the two will be reunited.

We'll save that for another day.

It's a comfort to know that I've already been purchased back, that I am free to choose to not be wicked, to not indulge in the false riches of some sin fetish. If you think about it, all sin is a fetish. It's some kind of kinky thing that we choose to gratify our own desires. It's a liberating thing to know we don't have to choose that because someone better than me has already demonstrated the better Way.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 October 2012

All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 8, verses 9 and 10.

If you've read this blog for any amount of time, you'll recall my disdain for celebrity status. I really don't care for pop culture and our focus on celebrities and their various dysfunctions. Just yesterday I read about a British sperm donation service called Fame Daddy that is starting up, offering celebrity sperm donations for as little as \$24,000 US. It's not enough that we see celebrity mugs posted everywhere or that they dictate social policy and religious beliefs to us. No, they can now donate sperm and for less than you can buy a new GM truck, you can get sperm from a member of the House of Lords, from a British Oscar winning actor, or a Premier soccer player. If that's your choice, please don't be surprised if you get what you pay for.

It's meaningless.

And then there is the election. Not just the presidential election, but all the Congressional elections where slinging mud has become the game of the day. In three weeks, Americans will exercise the right to replenish the government of our representative republic with some new faces. Though they're from the common folk (in most cases), let's face it: those who we elect to govern often lord their status over us. It's not just the Secret Service protection: it's that the political class has insulated itself from its constituents. Why do we let them do this to us? Why don't we insist on better?

Again, it's meaningless.

And then there are the people of high stature. We look up to them, thinking they are the paragons of virtue. Maybe it's a church leader. Maybe it's an athlete. Maybe it's a politician, or a role model, or someone who wins an award, or a military hero. Maybe we get a peek behind their genuinely good deeds to see that those deeds are a front. Or, sometimes equally disillusioning, we get to see that these people make mistakes like everyone else. George Washington owned slaves; Abraham Lincoln wanted to save the union more than he wanted to free the slaves. Lance Armstrong may or may not have doped. Our grandparents, our parents, our personal heroes. Sometimes we see them for who they are and when we do we see, it isn't a pretty sight.

Once again, meaningless.

Please understand me: I'm no better than a celebrity, Barack Obama, or someone with more knowledge of the Bible than me. I'm no better than the sometime hero you see for who they are, who happens to be tarnished instead of shining. What I'm doing is judging the behavior of some to be unacceptable for me and talking about it to demonstrate the point made in today's verses. All our best ideals and best human aspirations are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Please remember, too, that these verses come on the heels of earlier verses that discussed how we all have our places, how nobody has the power to cheat death forever, and that wickedness won't release us without help from God above. Verses 9 and 10 reinforce these earlier thoughts, showing that even when we know our place and even when sin seems to rule over us, it's meaningless. The longer we wade in the mud of sin, the more meaningless, even hopeless, we should see it is. Sin is meaningless.

What's more, it's powerless. The power of sin is deceptive because it is devoid of meaning. When something is meaningless, it has no meaning; that's a real DUH statement, don't you think? But take that devoid-of-meaning concept to its next logical step and see that, if something has no meaning for you, then it need not have any power over you. Sin has no meaning for someone who trusts in God. Sin is powerless against its opposite alternative. All the human scheming or human effort we can muster is powerless against even the seeming smallest thought of God. What has no meaning for you can have no power over you. It can only truly hurt if you

let it, even when things come careening into our lives unexpectedly. Sure, it can threaten you, but it can't take you over unless you let it (even if you are overrun).

And we weren't created for that meaninglessness. We were created to reflect God's glory and power and to share that in the world. That includes sharing with celebrities. How much better would the world be if people used fame and status to proclaim faith in God and what we can do with that in our lives instead of just glitz, glamour and garish dysfunction in the tabloids? Sure, it's idealistic, but why not? We were made for that, not for the red carpet. We can and should insist on better. We were created for meaning, not meaningless existence.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 18 October 2012

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 19 October 2012

When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 11.

I'm against capital punishment; let's just get that out there now. I don't trust our government to get it right when it comes to carrying out the ultimate punishment for a crime. Statistically, compared to the number of people actually incarcerated, DNA testing absolves an almost insignificant percentage of prisoners. But it does absolve some and that's where my lack of faith in the system comes into play.

It isn't some "if we can just save one person" ideology (though that thinking is true). What about the many cases where the trial simply got it wrong? I don't believe the system is rigged or that it tries to target some groups for death and others get off easy. My belief isn't really, fully Biblical; I won't try to twist Scripture to justify it. Indeed, especially throughout the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of God commanding that people be put to death as justice. And my belief isn't self-righteous. This isn't about me. I simply think it is more punishing for someone to remain in prison and 'rot' for their crime versus being executed for it. More importantly, such a sentence gives even the most hardened heart an opportunity to repent. We're all worthy of death for our sins. Thanks be to God that He gives us a way to repent.

One thing I do see as justification for my belief is how the American system of capital punishment is so greatly delayed. Often, it takes years for a convict to make it through the appeals process and all the way to the death chamber. That in itself seems excessive, maybe even cruel for both the criminal and the people he affected. By my read of today's verse, that's discouraging. Long trials followed by years-long appeals seem to drain the justice out of the process. Does it make sure that the ultimate sentence is not meted out cavalierly? Possibly. I think that, more to the point, it simply drags it out.

That's never a good idea. If you're a parent, you quickly learn that punishment for an infraction needs to be swift and appropriate. Instilling discipline is an act of love, not an act of retribution. For it to be effective, it needs to be close to the infraction. If you're a manager, you quickly learn that, to preserve team cohesiveness and focus, punishment or reaction needs to be swift and appropriate. The team needs to understand consequences for substandard performance or misbehavior. If you're in the military, you quickly learn that punishment needs to be swift and appropriate to the crime, and that the Uniform Code of Military Justice is designed for just this kind of action.

You can see the common chord. Re-read the verse and I think you see that 'swift and appropriate' is not only Godly: it's simple common sense. The longer you let a problem fester, generally the worse it gets. It's much easier and far preferable to 'pony up' to irresponsibility and take the punishment than to duck for cover and hope to avoid bad press. It's far better to own up to your actions and endure swift justice versus flying below the radar and live in fear of getting caught. I think that's why God said what He did in this verse. Don't drag out punishment. Get it done and do it Godly so that we can return to Him once more.

Better yet is to not sin in the first place. But when we do, punishment should be swift and appropriate. It always is. Unless you are a sociopath or without conscience, I find that when I do wrong I'm usually quickly aware of it. I feel guilty if I knowingly say or do something wrong or in sin. That guilt, that stinging conscience, is a gift of swift and appropriate justice. God gives it to me to let me realize when I've done wrong, giving me an opportunity to turn from it and follow Him to do better. Regardless of any other temporal punishment that ensues, this personal awareness of my sin is a cloud with a silver lining.

Perhaps if someone close to me were murdered I would come to feel differently about the death penalty; that's possible. I would hope it would not be for reasons of vengeance. When I read about truly heinous criminals, or terrorist masterminds who coldly plot the murder of thousands, or when I read stories like the one I read yesterday of the father who deliberately tied his stepson to a tree and then burned him alive (except that the child hung on and died years later, still in agony, of cancer), my blood boils like anyone else's. An eye for an

eye. I don't believe in capital punishment, but I understand it and for some truly evil crimes, that understanding gets very close to endorsement. And yet, when I think of God being executed for something He didn't do, yet He took it anyway, I think to myself 'there must be a better way.' So I'll pray for the victims, and even pray for the men on death row, and pray that God's justice would be done no matter how the end is resolved.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 22 October 2012

Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. Ecclesiastes 8, verses 12 and 13.

Good wins out in the end. Pretty simple platitude, isn't it? In election season, your guy is the good guy and the other guy is a no good so & so. The other guy seems to use a bunch of dirty tricks to get what he wants and we the people end up getting the short shrift, right? Or is it?

And what about at work? I've worked for all kinds of people, but some of the ones I remember best are the ones who screwed me over. Either I gave them opportunities or they simply went around me and let me have it but good. I've been rolled off projects when I shouldn't have; I've been passed over for lesser people; I've been fired from jobs in which I was brought in to fix someone else's wrongs. If you think about it, the people who game the system always seem to get ahead of me, right? Or is that so?

How about in your finances? I don't know about you but there just don't seem to be enough zeros before the decimal point when I look at my checkbook. I keep waiting for someone to spread golden goose manure underneath my money tree. Sure, times are hard and I have some serious bills in my name, some deep debts to repay. I've been blessed with a job that pays more than any other I've ever had, but it just doesn't seem to be enough. When I read the news, I read about rich fat cats who have so much more than I do and they aren't working 50, 60 or 70 hours a week being away from home eight of the last nine weeks. Do you have enough money in your life? I sure don't, right? Or, again, is that really so?

It isn't. You know it isn't. Good really does win out in the end. Sometimes I read up on my Bible and see that the whole thing seems kind of pointless. THAT is a strange thing to say about the inerrant word of God. I mean, it is pre-ordained that evil will be defeated in the end and that God's good will prevail for eternity. What's the point in the devil even trying? What's the point when he must surely know he'll be defeated? The Word is the way God chooses to reveal Himself to us, and within it is the story of the ages, namely His unending good love overcoming the unspeakable arrogance of evil. What is the point in evil even trying when its future is pre-ordained for failure?

The point is to reflect God's glory. God doesn't need evil to make Himself look good. He's God. He can do it on His own. We aren't God, though, and we're limited. It's we limited humans who need the contrast, who need to see Him against an alternative to truly understand how beautiful his pure, just love really is.

It's like the movies. How many villains get vanquished at the end when good triumphs over evil? Darth Vader? Voldemort? The Sherriff of Nottingham? Dr Evil? Lex Luthor, the Joker, and a host of Marvel villains in all the comic book movies Hollywood churns out these days? Evil is on the rise and good doesn't seem to stand a chance...until it does. Face it: we like to watch the bad guys be bad, but we don't like the story to end that way because fiction reflects life. We like that good finishes first because, in the real world, it usually does.

I honestly believe that most people want good to triumph in the end, but that they're scared of finding out that it does. Committing to being on the side of God takes real commitment, real sacrifice. We don't want to do that if we don't have to, yet we find comfort in knowing that the bad times won't last forever. If we thought they would, we would despair.

The key to not despairing is to cling to faith, saving faith, in God. That faith imbues reverence and fear of God, that fear being respect, love, desire, and knowledge. The central focus of our days can become worship instead of avoidance. Until just the last few years, I always thought worship was something we did. It was a Sunday thing. Now I see it is a way of life for God. We worship in how we talk, the things we do, the way we interact, and all we are in addition to the formal times of prayer, supplication or formal fellowship. We worship for Him and to Him but NOT because He's some vain supernatural power-monger. In worship – and thus in

how we live our lives – He pours out Himself, that just and pure and life-giving love. By living in reverence and worship of Him, he fuels us and builds us up and imparts real knowledge into us. Through worship, we are in communion with Him.

When that happens, the bad guys don't stand a chance.

Good really does win out in the end. No matter who you vote for, history eventually judges the elected in a fair way. Your candidate may not always win, but a good system generally works well. There may not be as much money as we'd like, but God always provides what we need to get through today. Workplace issues tend to be resolved. By and large, good always prevails. I mean, why work for the weekend if the weekend isn't going to be good? You and I like a happy ending. The best happy ending is beginning in Christ.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 24 October 2012

So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun. Ecclesiastes 8, verse 15.

Last night, I enjoyed a concert in Minnesota. I'm working again in downtown Minneapolis but staying at a hotel in Edina: a hotel that is attached to an indoor city park. There in the park last night a local band gave a concert. I didn't stay long, not more than 20 minutes or so. They weren't playing any music I knew, and there were other things I wanted to get done during the evening. It was long enough, however, to enjoy something that I had forgotten I enjoyed. If you haven't watched a band or orchestra play in awhile, I recommend it. This band was 45 pieces, and it's a magical thing to watch and listen to that many individuals, all playing different parts of the same composition together. Anarchy and chaos are organized in angel song. Get close to the musicians and you see them playing hard, concentrating, breathing in controlled bursts, individually manipulating their instruments to achieve just the right sound. Back away further and you get a different effect, this one a merging of that individual melody and harmony into a single voice.

In moments like that, there is nothing better than simply to revel in that moment. Did I mention I had just enjoyed a glass of free wine and a free meal in the hotel lobby? All this for free; I did nothing to deserve it, earn it, prepare it, or clean up from it. Pure grace from the hotel staff and from above. Again, in moments like that, there is nothing better than to eat and drink and be glad.

Except that's only the half of it. We've covered this ground before, about how there is nothing new or good under the sun without belief in God. With belief, life need not be a proposition timed only for the here and now. The here and now can be enjoyed as the proving ground for the enjoyment of the eternal living to come. Without belief? Without belief, you only get the here and now. If that's the case, eat hearty and drink up. And maybe enjoy some music now and then. Without belief, that's as good as it gets for you. Enjoy the music now because eternal silence is what comes for you after this.

Notice something, though, about the verse: it dispels with unbelief. While the verse seems to endorse the epicurean lifestyle of eat, drink and be merry, it only does so before then stating clearly that all we have – the life – is given to us by God. Even that epicurean ideal is still under, by, and through the Almighty. Solomon doesn't discount the good benefits of enjoying what life has to offer. Instead, he reminds us that eating and drinking under the sun may just actually mean enjoying God's blessings. God provides for our needs, and because He does and they are good, we should enjoy what He provides. It is a free gift. He gives us the things to eat, drink, listen, and enjoy not because He has to but because He wants to. It's a love thing.

And why enjoy it? So that we may live in joy. We enjoy life to savor joy in life. We savor joy to share it. The truest joy of all comes from living in God's blessings. We can try to live apart from them, but that's simply fooling ourselves because all the we know is under His dominion (even that which unbelievers enjoy). Eating, drinking, listening, sharing are all spiritual acts of worship when we enjoy what the Lord pours out for us out of generosity and love. He fuels us and asks us to join Him in enjoying love...by then sharing it with others. Go ye therefore and do the same. And turn up the music, please.

The band I saw last night was hardly unique. I know there are thousands of them all across the country. But as I mentioned, it has been awhile, many years in fact, since I simply sat in front of an orchestra, symphony or just a band bigger than the small praise band at my church. It's an amazing thing to watch so many people make synchronized, organized, focused but inspired music. When people play well, it's like they surrender to their abilities and to the music itself. That's when the real magic happens, and I believe it's more than just playing instruments. Music is divine inspiration. I think music speaks to us in ways that words like these simply can't. Words speak to the heart and mind. Music addresses the soul. God can nourish us through music. Last night God fed my soul just a little bit with the music of a band in a city park. Today I get to share that with you. Sometime today, turn on your radio, or iPod, or even start singing yourself. It's nourishing to the soul. Enjoy it and remember you're being given a gift from above.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 25 October 2012

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night— then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it. Ecclesiastes 8, verses 16 and 17.

Have you ever seen “Ben Hur?” Not the 1920s silent version, but the 1959 epic with Charlton Heston? There's one scene near the end of the movie, when Haya Harareet is taking Ben Hur's mother and sister to Christ to have them healed that she said something which stuck with me: “the world is more than we know.” These two women have had their home, their lives, their entire future stolen from them by the cruelty of Rome. They have contracted leprosy and understand that their lives are to be outcast painful misery until they die ignominious death in obscurity. What does their friend do for them? She takes them to see a Judean prophet who she believes is the Son of God and lays on them this beautiful line of truth. The line sums up today's verses perfectly.

The world is more than we know. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. In my limited thinking, those two thoughts aren't far apart. Just before this section the author tells us that the best thing we can expect of the world is temporal pleasure. Now he's saying that the world is more than we know. Pleasure is good but why it is pleasurable is beyond us. It is good to eat, drink and enjoy, and God wants us to do those things, but only within Him because of reasons only He fully understands. Call me silly but I think that's a beautiful thing.

Really? Really really. You see, the world really is more than we know. If there are answers beyond my understanding, that's alright with me. Can we control weather patterns (all conspiracy theories aside please)? Can we create a patch of grass from nothingness? What started gravity? Why doesn't honey spoil? Why are we fascinated with Honey Boo Boo? Science can give us many explanations and most of them are accurate. But it doesn't explain everything. Human knowledge can describe life, but it can't explain it, or create it. Want a challenge? Explain love. Explain to me why that music I heard a couple of nights ago made me feel good. Explain the soul, the irrational, the romantic, hope. Someone please explain hope. Not the psychological condition of it: the fact and practice of it. We can explain how sex leads to conception, even the cellular and genetic transactions that create life forms. But we can't generate life itself. We can't even explain the substance of the force that is life. That makes even scientists throw up their hands. Somewhere God might be smiling. See. The world is more than we know.

There's another thing I like about the verses: they talk about meaning. Creation has meaning. We aren't just a lucky amalgamation of happy coincidences. We are more than just selective breeding. We and everything around us have meaning. To God it must seem simple; to us it is infinitely complex. But complexity speaks of order and meaning. Our world and why things are the way they are has specific order, even in what we see as random chaos, and that order has purpose. I don't know about you but I find that thought comforting. I'm here for a reason. Things are the way they are for a reason. We have reason and purpose on our side, and it's not something we need to worry about. Sure, we can (and should) learn about it, investigate it, even use it to improve the world itself; God gave us this place to have dominion over it. Yet all the 'why's' about it aren't something our forefathers fully understood and we may not either.

Off and on this year there has been news about scientists finding ‘the God particle.’ Specifically, it's news about their continuing search to find that subatomic particle. As I understand it, the “Higgs Boson” sub-atomic particle would be a piece of matter that preceded the matter we know today. It would be a residual of what existed before ‘the Big Bang’ that some scientists think created the universe. Thus, the term ‘God particle’ is almost derisive in its label. All scientists have found about it is a possible signature of what might be the Higgs Boson particle. They haven't yet found the actual particle itself, just what might be a shadow of what could be or have been the elusive particle. I suspect that, somewhere out there, God is again smiling at us, maybe even laughing.

And in the proverbial according to Ben Hur, I think it's actually evidence that the world is more than we know.
I'm ok with that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 26 October 2012

So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. Ecclesiastes 9, verses 1 and 2.

All my life I've wondered what's over the rainbow. In fact, I wrote these words while sitting in an airplane seat at 38,000 feet, listening to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It wasn't the Judy Garland version: it was the mellow but beautifully haunting version from a few years ago by Israel Kamakawiwoole. You've heard it: one man playing a ukulele singing "ooh ooh ooh ooh." I can't listen to the song without getting teary eyed and wondering what's over the rainbow. It's one of those songs that seems wistfully appropriate at graduations, weddings or funerals. I'm sure the flight attendants were looking at me and wondering what I was writing or thinking of; the guy sitting beside me shot me a look like "dude, what's wrong?" Can't really blame them. I just get weepy sometimes.

And when I do, I still wonder what's up ahead. Will I get what I want in life and just how will that happen? When will I finally be at peace? Will my family be ok? Will my kids grow in families of their own? Grandchildren? Great-grandchildren? What will my wife and I be like when we are old, if we grow old? Lord, what will happen? What's over the rainbow?

I suppose I like the song because I was raised watching the Wizard of Oz on TV every Easter. Back when there were only three channels of TV in the US, CBS used to show the Wizard of Oz every Easter season, and we watched it every time. I remember my parents telling me "Dorothy was from Minnesota just like you are" and thinking that this can't be so because Dorothy was from Kansas (though Judy Garland was indeed born in Northern Minnesota). And I was always mesmerized by the magic visions of living in a place where trees talked, scarecrows danced, and a great and powerful wizard could grant you any wish he wanted.

Maybe that's one reason why I've always been a dreamer. What was it Kenny Rogers sang? Don't fall in love with a dreamer; I'm sure my wife could tell you why because she's a better person than me. Maybe Kenny spent too much time wondering what was over the rainbow as well.

What really is over there? Metaphorically speaking, there's that pot of gold and all those wishes come true. But if you want to learn what's really over the rainbow, re-read today's verses. In fact, read all of Scripture at least once through. The Good Book is God's love letter to people He cherishes, as well as His instruction manual for life, and the way He imparts His love into our lives. It is the answer to what lies over the rainbow as well. Scripture tells how we all await the same fate of death and judgment. He really does have the whole world in His hands, something on which I reflected months ago in a similar blog. He has the world in His hands and He knows exactly how it will go. Somewhere over the rainbow is peace: real, eternal, lasting, divine peace that we get to share with Him, who is that peace.

But be advised: read ahead to verse 3, which talks about how things in-between now and then may not all be biscuits & gravy. God allows evil in the world so that we may learn of His radiant glory. He allows us knowledge, free choice, and lives of humanity so that we might learn of His love and what His love has in store for us. When we reject that, is it any surprise that He would allow us to experience evil? If we reject one, don't we accept the other? Even if we don't choose evil, we actually do if we reject the love God truly intends for us. By the time we realize "this isn't what I signed up for," it's too late. Evil lurks everywhere in the world and it's waiting to use you and I as pawns in a millennial game of chess that evil is destined to lose.

Destined to lose, that is, whether or not we cross the rainbow before. I'm reading a book on the end times and while I find it interesting, I also finding myself not caring much about it. I know how the end turns out, I know Christ is victorious. The details of how, when and where He comes back don't matter as much to me as the

fact that He will indeed be coming back. A rapture, a great tribulation, a final battle outside Jerusalem, a millennial kingdom? Sure, if you think so. To me, it's all minutiae. I find that knowing those specifics ahead of time doesn't matter much. The point of them is to point us to Him here and now, not when the end comes and it's too late. Live in Him here and now, in what we do here today, not just in someone's prediction of how the world will come to its end.

Call me presumptuous, but I think that's what the verses today are also saying. The fate of each of us is death, and it's a death due for the fact we've each chosen sin at some point. The point of the verses is to remind us that God Himself also offers each of us eternal salvation that renders those sins moot. One day, some day, He will indeed finally defeat evil and all the sins we've ever let rule our lives. He paid for them, He eliminated them, He made them go away.

He made it possible to one day see what lies somewhere over the rainbow.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 29 October 2012

This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! Ecclesiastes 9, verses 3 and 4.

I'm hopeful; I really am. I have to be: I've let myself become a Dallas Cowboys fan in the age of Jerry Jones. One has to be hopeful in order to root for the Cowboys these days because they aren't a very strong team. They have good players and a good coach, but they have played inconsistently for at least the last six years, probably longer, and they aren't good in a clutch. Let's make sure we understand each other: none of the current players on the Cowboys' squad is evil, and I'll even boldly say I don't think their owner is (though many might disagree).

How trivial a football game is when compared to real evil. Evil is slaughtering people because of their faith. Evil is standing by idle while good people are killed. Evil is plotting to maximize your profits knowing it will decimate the lives of people who work for you. Let's not kid ourselves, though: evil is much lower down the food chain as well. Evil is when your two year old tells you 'no.' Evil is cheating on your taxes or padding your expense report. Evil is the white lie you tell your spouse to make them feel better.

Evil is anything that is apart from God. The punishment for embracing evil is death. That destiny awaits everyone because, at one time or another, every person you and I know – and you and I – chose evil over God. If you're like me, you have some days that are better than others, some days when there is less evil overtly at work in your life.

Let's not kid ourselves (again): one of the things that is over the rainbow is death.

Notice, then, that the second verse talks about the living having hope. Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. We the living have a chance to repent, to choose again, to do better. We the living have the opportunity to kindle faith where none existed before. The dead are already gone, done for. They can't take a chance, choose or do. If that's not the clarion call to say "act now" then what is? We will all die and we don't even know when. Why not act on faith now?

And don't forget that, per the Apostle Peter, Satan prances around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. He lurks anxiously, looking for people to lure away from siding with God by tempting them with evil. Even the most meek, tiny child renders the roaring lion powerless by simply telling him 'no' to his offers of temptation. How much more, then, could you and I render him likewise when we are better trained, better equipped, and better prepared? That roaring lion, too, is destined for eventual death.

Speaking of preparation, maybe that's what my Cowboys need. Take a few lessons from Bill Belichick, whose New England Patriots (another team I follow) walloped St. Louis 45-7 yesterday. The key was preparation. Maybe telling the press crews 'no' a few more times would help instead of mugging for the camera; maybe a few extra passing routes in practice or a an extra practice itself. Maybe the coaching staff should tell the owner GM to take a hike; maybe the owner GM should actually do it. Death awaits us all. At their current pace, what immediately awaits the Dallas Cowboys is an idle post-season. Even a struggling live team in the playoff is better than an idle team (even a Detroit Lions team) then.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 October 2012

For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Ecclesiastes 9, verses 5 and 6.

Election Day in America is one week from today. Let's all breathe a collective "thank God" of relief at that statement. Me, I'm a political junkie, and I've found myself exasperated the last few years at the state of representative democracy in my homeland. Our fiscal and internal crises are real, and external threats are still metastasizing, yet our politics seem trivial when compared to the challenges. There's plenty of blame to go around for why this is, and there are hundreds of extenuating reasons. I have done my part in standing up for what I believe, but I can't say it has always done good. Arguments by me and others have made for division and arguments and bad feelings. At the end of this extremely contentious election season, I'm very glad it's almost over.

One hundred years from now, assuming this representative republic still resides on this planet, none of that contention, blame, extenuating reasons, exasperation, or collective relief will matter. True, the winner of the election will have long been in the history books (as well as in the ground with you and me), but the things we worried about in the autumn of 2012 will have long gone away to dust in the wind. The big issues matter, but the host of small things (that make big issues) will be long-forgotten. That's the way of nature. It kind of puts things into perspective, don't you think? All the things that we spend way too much energy worrying about are useless.

Don't believe me? Open your eyes to a Jesus moment and remember Him telling about how all our worrying wouldn't add a second to our lives, and about how we shouldn't worry about things because, if God provides for birds or flowers in the field, He will certainly provide for us as well since we're more than birds or wildflowers. Worry is meaningless. It's not just meaningless: it's counterproductive.

Take it from me: I used to be a real worrier. I used to spend many late night hours worrying, and if I couldn't sleep, I would lie awake in my bed worrying about how tired I would be the next day because I was so tired from being up all night worrying. Seriously, you can't make up stupid things like that! I used to worry about airplane flights, whether or not I would get the car I wanted some day, why I didn't have more than one real girlfriend in high school, how cold it would get in the wintertime, and above all, what people thought of me. Give me an empty room and I would worry about why it wasn't filled.

To tell you the truth, I can't point to a specific event or time in my life when I gave up worrying about things. Worry darn near killed me when my wife and I were separated two years ago, and I think that part of the reconciliation process was my learning to give up worrying. It helped to make healing work. I do know that what made the difference in giving up that worry was growing in faith. You can't have faith in a God who has our ultimate good in mind in all things and then keep clinging to the subtle idolatry that is worry. Worry places ourselves above God, so giving up that worry allows for the opportunity to get back in line with where He wants to lead us. What's more, in concert with today's verses, you have to let go of that worry and then step back to see that, in the long run, it is meaningless. Be concerned about important things that need your attention, and be pro-active in participating in how God wants you to act on them, but don't worry about them. Plan, don't obsess; have trust and faith, not worry and discouragement.

Those are good things to remember when preparing to go to the voting booth. As for the country, I know where I hope He wants to lead us. My political beliefs aren't your political beliefs and thanks be for that. I hope God favors the candidate and the issues I support, but that's not all up to me. God is better than our petty politics. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, both sides of our issues believe God is on their side. In the long run, those issues won't matter much. All the specific reasons of why we will vote the way we will won't be around forever. God, however, will be. That's something we don't ever need to worry about.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 31 October 2012

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. Ecclesiastes 9, verses 7 – 10.

Happy Halloween, all. Today, go eat with gladness, drink with a joyful heart, and be clothed in white even if you are clothed in some other kind of costume. Enjoy life with your wife (or your husband) all your days because this is what you're given. Tomorrow, return to your job and whatever task is in front of you, do it well. Do these things because, when you're dead, you're dead...unless you're Jason, or Michael Myers, or Freddie Krueger, or Cher on your next farewell tour. On Halloween, remember: those scary people never die.

As an aside, though, while you're hopefully enjoying handing out candy (or trick or treating), consider those who are hurting today. Millions of people in the US are suffering today after the hurricane that devastated the East Coast yesterday. If you are moved, consider donating. Contact the Red Cross. Or, if you would like your donation to go to something more direct, consider donating to Pastor Matt Popovits at Our Savior Lutheran in New York. He is collecting donations for direct relief at <http://mightykingdomlight.wordpress.com/projects-of-light/>. Funds will go directly to people there who need them via a reputable source with no dog in the hunt other than serving people through God's hands.

But this isn't all a plug for your pocketbook. The author, King Solomon, the richest man in antiquity, wrote these verses in what, to me, seems like a particularly cynical mood. In fact, most of these last two chapters of Ecclesiastes seem pretty cynical. Go ahead and enjoy life now because you're going to die. This really is as good as it gets. Solomon realized we need more than just funds, charity, or holidays. Of course, as we've talked before, the entire book is an exposition of what life is like absent God.

Absent God looks a whole lot like a suburban Halloween. I'm not big on Halloween. I gave up trick or treating when I was eleven, and I really don't like the sinister focus of the holiday; this is ground I think we've covered before. But think about it: the purpose of the day is to scare the heebie jeebies out of people, especially little kids. We celebrate death, macabre, horror, crime, madness and witchcraft. What's more, we encourage the youngest of us to model this, making monsters, ghouls and witches seem cute and cuddly. If we could have the holiday without all the scary subterfuge, I think I'd be ok with it. As it is, I don't care for the focus.

Here in the suburbs, where evil dresses in complacency, it's easy to get a picture of what life without God can be like. It's teflon-coated kindness wrapped up in double-mortgaged brickwork and carried around in a Coach purse. Enjoy it, folks, this is as good as it gets. Oh, and if you don't like the suburbs, don't be getting all proud because you know darn well that it's no better off in the cities, where drive by shootings, hookers, gangs and worse don't even bother to hide. Ditto out in the country, where there's plenty of trouble to be had as well.

Ah, Dave, you're turning into an old fart. Maybe, but I'm not there yet.

I'm not there because I'm thankful for days like today and for verses like these. They give me hope in knowing that life doesn't need to be this way. We were made for better and better is what's in store. In the mean time, there are days for fun, days for working, days for enjoying the fruits of our labors, and days for fellowship with each other. More than that, there are days for serving, which is why we were put here in the first place. That's why I include today the link to help others. On days like today, evil doesn't hide. This week it came in the form of a monster storm that has devastated lives. Won't you please consider giving? I will.

And if you swing by my house in the evil north Texas suburbs tonight, you'll find my wife and I sitting on our front patio. We don't have a front porch: we have a patio that I built six years ago to cover a bare spot between

a pear tree and our house. We will be sitting outside around a fire pit, holding a big bowl of candy. We might also be drinking wine, so if you come by, please feel free to sit down and let me pour you a glass. Have a bite of candy, or maybe some caramel corn (my wife has a great recipe). Together, let's beat back a little bit of the darkness behind the day. We will eat, drink and enjoy life because, this side of heaven, the fellowship between us is as good as it gets. When we welcome God into that fellowship, there are no tricks or treats. There is Him, and His light outshines anything else we could ever try to conjure.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 1 November 2012

I have seen something else under the sun: 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. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. Ecclesiastes 9, verses 11 and 12.

Today is the day after Halloween. When I think of today, I think of the Disney movie, "Fantasia." Disney drew a composite of two scenes in that movie. One was a Halloween scene with evil spirits dancing around the fires of hell, reveling in their evil ways to the theme of Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain." Terror descends on a world powerless to break free from its grip. Scary stuff; not your usual Disney princess fare.

The scene immediately after this, though, is radically different. It is set to Schubert's 'Ave Maria,' which is, I think, the most beautiful piece ever written. Worshippers walk out of the darkness and gather in light, bringing offerings of repentance and good to God. The scene is pastoral, comforting, moving. The darkness fades into light and the light is quiet and powerfully good.

Evil gives way to good. Darkness cedes to light and Satan cedes to God. Hate loses, love wins. Even in the world where Solomon correctly states that 'time and chance happen to them all,' the end of all things will not be an ending of hatred. It seems that evil always has the upper hand, is canner and cooler than faith. Search your best heart, though, and you'll find that's just not true. God will prevail. He always does and we will benefit from that.

But that only happens if we let it. To far too many of us, it is still the day of darkness. Sure, circumstances happen. Random storms destroy much of the Jersey shore and that wasn't preventable, wasn't something brought on by Snooki or Pauly D or even The Situation. It was an act of nature; we can argue later about nature being frustrated by sin. Let's just agree, for now, that it was a storm that came about randomly, and not a cause and effect of any person's actions. Ditto earthquakes, financial crises, car accidents, cancer, and a host of other tragedies that seem to happen just as surely as the good times do.

It's what we do in response that counts. God's grace gives us all things, all blessings, and even allows these tragedies. He does that to demonstrate to us how we need to rely on Him, how we need to trust Him in all ways. Don't be mistaken: God is at work whether we accept it or not; we're powerless to stop that. We do have power, though, over our choice of whether or not to accept it. You don't have to believe in God. You can stay in your costume all year, and go around looking for the next big thing, the next free handout. You can party like it's 1999 even though that was already so long ago. You can deliver all kinds of tricks, especially when you let yourself be mentored by he who thrives on such things.

You don't have to walk in the light. It's your choice. You don't have to believe. Indeed, there are many logical, reasonable people here who can logically, reasonably prove you shouldn't. It's your choice. You can choose butter pecan or strawberry ice cream. You can choose to live in Connecticut or Arizona. You can date the girl or not. You can read these words or not. You can believe in Christ or not. Your choice.

Your belief might not prevent or cure your cancer, but it will help you persevere and overcome it even if the eventual outcome is physical death. Your belief won't help you avoid a bad car accident, but it will help you deal with the aftermath. Your belief won't prevent the storm, but it will indeed help you cope with bouncing back from it. Your choice to submit to being brought to faith won't save you from dying here, but it will save you from dying forever. Your choice.

You can still pretend it's Halloween or you can realize that today is All Saints Day, a new day, a new month, and a new set of challenges and choices. What wise choiceS will you make today?

I like lots of different kinds of music. One day, try contrasting Reba McIntire with Weezer. Or maybe Beethoven with Hank Williams (Senior or Junior, thank you). Or Grover Washington for a Friday night followed by AC/DC

on a Saturday morning. But my favorite contrast of all is the one I mentioned at the start of today's blog. I think Schubert's composition is the most beautiful music ever written, and I like the way Disney contrasted the two pieces, flowing one into the other. Have a great November – Christmas is next month! – and make wise choices today. One of mine will be to turn up the radio. And I might just go watch that movie.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 5 November 2012

I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. Ecclesiastes 9, verses 13 through 16.

What do you make of this story? I'm forgoing political commentary online until after the election tomorrow is decided; I'm doing this to keep a promise to friends. So, instead, I'm reading a book about the American presidency itself, about how the men who have held the office built it into what it was. These men mattered.

In reading today's verses, I'm reminded of John Adams. The US would not have become a nation but for Adams and his intellect. It was Adams who led the faction that pushed for independence. It was Adams who designed and obtained the appointment of George Washington to lead the Continental Army in the Revolution. It was Adams who arranged for Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence and for it to be adopted as it was. It was Adams who negotiated most of the foreign loans that sustained the nation throughout the Revolution, and it was Adams whose leadership and insight narrowly avoided what would have been a disastrous war with the French in 1798.

Yet today Adams is remembered as a minor president, a mostly ineffective executive who tended the office in-between two presidents (Washington and Jefferson) of larger stature and greater impact. The things he did in his one four-year term bridged the founding presidential terms of Washington and laid the groundwork for the strengthening years of Jefferson. When I read these verses, I think of a man like John Adams.

In reading them again, I also think of a man like Ross Perot, my former employer and two-time presidential gadfly. I've met Mr. Perot several times and can attest that he is the real deal; what you see on TV is who you meet in person. His style of management in a company is exemplary. Yet the two companies he started and built into information technology powerhouses have been gobbled up by struggling and mismanaged competitors. If you talk with people who worked for him, there is loyalty remaining to H. Ross Perot and his solid, moral leadership. If you talk to the men his mercenaries rescued from Iran in 1979 (read "On Wings of Eagles" by Ken Follett for the whole story), they still have undying affection for their patron. All over Dallas, where I live, there are buildings and evidence of Mr. Perot's impact, donations, and philanthropy. Yet despite the fact he is a billionaire, Mr. Perot is little remembered. A generation from now, his work will be recalled as work by one of many who lived and thrived in an age where that was both possible and encouraged. When I read these verses, I think also of a man like Ross Perot.

And when I read the verses yet again, I'm reminded of my father, Ken Terry. Only a few of the people who read these words actually remember him in person. He's been gone for fifteen years. My dad was a modest man, a civil servant who worked with the Army for 30 years. In other jobs, he sold insurance, helped young people get job training, and he even drove a cab. But it was the Army he loved the most. As a middle manager and middle-level instructor, he taught other people how to do their jobs. Dad always loved jokes, and I've talked with more than one person who remembered him fondly as a man who always had a joke at hand or a smile on his face. Whether we know it or not, the government functions because of people in the various departments doing their jobs well. Policies and regulations may be formed at the higher levels, but it is the people in the middle who do their jobs, from delivering mail to accounting ledgers to teaching others how to handle ammunition, that actually make the government function. My dad was one such person who impacted the lives of others. Yet now, only 15 years after his death, his work is gone to obsolescence, the people he taught are all past or nearing retirement, and even the Army ammunition school in which he once taught is no longer as it was. Dad's contributions were important, but now they are largely forgotten. So when I think of these verses, in addition to President Adams and Mr. Perot, I think of men like my father.

This is the way of mankind. In my own career, the systems I used to master in the Air Force are either being decommissioned or are already on the scrap heap. The software I taught (for Mr. Perot in fact) is being shut

down because it can't remain competitive. The hotel where I used to work no longer remembers me. And even the career in which I now ply my skills is in real danger of being rendered moot. My contributions have been important at the time but to be honest with you, they won't matter much by the time I'm ready to retire.

And yet, I still believe the best is yet to come. Not just in my job or how I make a living, but in life in general. Men like John Adams, Ross Perot, and my father all mattered to God. I matter too.

Know what? I bet you can say the same. Maybe you and I didn't do great or marvelous things in our lives, and maybe only those who are in our immediate circle think we have done special things. But our lives do indeed have meaning, and our vocation hasn't been in vain. We have impacted others; in our own ways, you and I have helped to save the city...just like Adams, Perot and Dad. You and I do our best, just like so many millions of others, making the wisest, best choices we can at the time and doing our part to make the world go around. It's not the presidents or company owners or senior level consultants who do all the deciding and creating in the world. It's you and me and billions of others like us. We matter too.

We matter because we matter to God. Even if the world sees us as insignificant, God doesn't. To Him, we matter. We matter enough to die for.

And that's good enough to me. Last night, I flew into Baltimore where I'm working this week. My flight was delayed in Ohio while we waited on the ground for Air Force One to taxi away. The president was in town, campaigning at some last minute stop, hoping to pick up a few more votes before tomorrow's election. As I write these words, I can't say I think of the current American president as either poor or wise because what I think of him doesn't really matter. I can't say he has done anything to save the city, or even to govern boldly like that powerful king; that too doesn't really matter. What I can say is that I'm sure he too is doing his best at whatever he's doing. And just like you, me, John Adams, Ross Perot, my dad, and the opposition candidate, and the current president matters to God as well. We all do.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 6 November 2012

The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Ecclesiastes 9, verse 17.

Finally, Election Day is here. In what's become a recurring theme here and in other places, folks are tired of the electoral process. I am, you may be too. Today has been a long time coming, 18 months of formal campaigning and four years of constant campaigning by both sides, each trying to undermine the other. Someone is going to be elected president of the US today. First and foremost, one of two men will be elected the preserver, protector and defender of the Constitution of the United States. Whoever you're going to vote for, just make sure of one thing: vote. And when you do so, be kind, humble, confident and content.

So enough said about the election, even though, let's face it: this verse is fitting for a day like today. In the din of all that that has been said, quiet words seem to be more welcome than shouts of the ruler of fools...or even the fool ruler himself, whoever he may turn out to be.

But that's not really what comes to mind when I read these verses. I think they apply to every day. Just yesterday, I ran a meeting in Baltimore where we were reviewing application configuration diagrams. Instead of telling the people with whom I was meeting, I listened. I asked questions and proposed solutions, but for the most part I found myself listening through most of the day. Usually, I'm more active. I use my talents vocally and I'm not shy about weighing in. This time, I took a different approach, and I couldn't be more pleased. It made for an extremely productive trip, and I think I built stature for myself in the eyes of the client by holding my fire. Quiet words spoke more effectively than loud shouts of a fool.

Or I think of Mike, the maintenance manager at the field site where I worked in southern Italy. Mike was a civilian engineer, supervising both the equipment onsite and the crew of 6 civilians who maintained it. He was a good manager, and I learned a lot from him about leading people. Perhaps the best advice about giving advice I ever heard was something he said. We were talking in his office and I asked him what he did to be a good manager and he said "nothing." "I just sit here," he told me, "and listen while the folks talk through their problems. Generally, they come to the right conclusions without me telling them what to do." Quiet words of the wise instead of shouts from a ruler, eh?

When I read today's verse, I think of that anonymous Chinese man in Tiananman Square, standing there in front of the tank. His quiet words, if there were any words at all, spoke louder than all the gunfire that followed.

When I read today's verse, I think about Mr. Smith who went to Washington, who filibustered in the Senate (back when a filibuster actually meant talking instead of procedural delays) and spoke quietly and powerfully. If only such politicians weren't just in the movies...

When I read today's verse, I think of the single parents I know, quietly, determinedly doing their best to bring up kids alone. Their words speak louder than anyone else's I know.

Finally, when I read today's verse, I think of Jesus on the cross. What He did there is the fulfillment of the verse. His last few words couldn't have been more than a whisper. Scripture says that, at one point He cried out in a loud voice. I'm betting it wasn't as loud as the one He used in clearing out the temple only a few short days before. It was loud enough to be heard by the crowd standing nearby, but I doubt it carried far beyond them. After all, He was dying up there, gradually suffocating as it became more and more difficult to breathe. It would literally have been all He could do to even summon the breath to form words. His dying words were wise and quiet indeed, yet in quietly stating "it is finished" He said more than all the words of anyone else in history (including those foolish rulers).

When I read today's verses, I think of my Savior, gasping for air before gasping His last. I think that means more than all the fancy rhetoric, tele-prompted babble, or political invective combined. All the campaigning is done. All the speeches are over. All the time has come down to this, and still anything that has been said or will

be said by either of the presidential frontrunners is meaningless when compared to the fading, gasping words of the Man from Galilee as He gave up His life for yours and mine. No politician can do that; I don't know of any who would be willing. Today, go out and do your duty, but remember that quiet words are stronger than anything anyone can throw back at you. Whatever happens today, tomorrow will still be a fresh opportunity and one to live in grace.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 8 November 2012

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Ecclesiastes 9, verse 18.

Election Day is done and the results are in. The president is re-elected; the Senate is held by one party while the House is held by another. At state and local levels, one party advanced significantly more than the other.

Moot points. Totally moot points. Everyone who ran for public office this week was a sinner. Some believe in God; some don't. All are sinners regardless. And yet, of sinners are these great movements made. And through sinners does God display His glory and power. He does it so that we will see and cling to Him and love Him, and that we'll share that love with others. Out of all this angst, all this struggle comes good. In every crisis, even when good is hard to see, good results.

It takes just one sinner to destroy much good. One bad apple spoils the whole barrel, right? Exactly.

I am that sinner. My words carry much weight. The list of people whom this daily blog reaches numbers in the thousands. I write a few hundred words that are emailed, blogged, or Facebooked to a thousand more and I have no idea how many, if any, read them beyond that. What it does mean, though, is that a few thousand souls are directly affected by what I SAY five days a week. A few thousand souls touch a few thousand souls. Carry that over another time or two and you have a nation. All that from one person's words. True, I'm making more of myself than I probably am but I'm betting you see the point. If I am not careful, my words can easily lead someone astray. That thought crosses my mind because I don't want to live in fear of what I would have to tell my maker when He judges me. Most times, I do my best, but even when I do, I am still a sinner. If I'm not careful, I can be that sinner who destroys much good.

You are that sinner. What you say and do carries much weight, more than mine in fact. You're not more culpable, but you are more significant. You're in the thousand I touch. I'm betting that you're more gregarious and friendly and probably better connected to the ways of the real world than is yours truly. That means you have impact, very probably significant impact whether you realize it or not.

Expand this out and I think you'll see that everyone you and I know has the chance to do much good or to destroy much good. It simply starts with one person. Effective movements build from the bottom up, not the top down. From the bottom up builds consensus, numbers and action; from the top down emanates dictatorship. Which has more lasting power? I think you know, and it all starts with one person.

Even as this is so, it takes time to know, time to judge the wisdom of things. The wisdom of what happened yesterday is still being sorted out. If you're on the left, you're cautiously jubilant; if you're on the right, you're probably disappointed and wary. If you believe in God, no matter which side you're on, I hope you can see that God was at work, God is at work, and that the wisdom of what He's doing may be beyond our comprehension. Knowledge is more valuable than gold. Gold is more valuable than weapons, even very powerful weapons. Follow the logic and, with God, it holds up. Even as we don't fully understand all that happened yesterday, I know that there are lessons to be learned from it and that those lessons will be valuable. Even as I don't fully understand how God was at work, I trust that He was, and that good results from it.

That's the point of it all, isn't it? Trusting in God? Solomon thought so, else why would he have written these books of advice, warning and proverbial observations but for to help us trust God better?

The results are in. Whether I'm happy or not with them is moot. Whether you're happy is moot. What isn't moot is that the American system, as designed, works. It worked; it still works. Our founders bequeathed to us a system built on wisdom and trust: their wisdom in having faith in God and learning how men think, work and behave, and their trust in that faith and that wisdom. Whether you sit on the right or the left – or maybe in the irrelevantly thin middle – it's my hope that you have that wisdom and faith to move forward, shall we say, into whatever lies ahead.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 9 November 2012

As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 1.

Doesn't this one just light up your senses? Dead flies...I think of dead flies stuck in cobwebs or dust bunnies underneath the furniture; nasty. Dead flies in perfume. Now, I don't know what that smells like but I bet it smells bad. A swarm of dead flies in your Boucheron? Maybe it doesn't smell as bad as I think. A lot of perfume contains alcohol, or some kind of astringent base. Then again, think of how perfume used to be made (or how the most expensive perfume is still made). Animal fats or natural oils are used. They are scented with flowers, other musks, natural scents or scented water. That takes time and expensive effort; no wonder it costs so much. There is a section of the New Testament that talks about the woman pouring a whole bottle of nard over Jesus' head, to anoint and prepare him for burial. Wanting to pocket some extra cash, Judas Isacariot has a cow over this because nard was extremely expensive even back then. That's because nard perfume is painstakingly extracted from thousands of Valerian flowers. It was tricky, time-consuming stuff to make, and it was all organic. If you think about it, if a few flies got into your bottle of that, after those flies decomposed the liquid might just smell pretty foul. All that expensive oil would be ruined.

That's the comparison of how a few foolish mistakes taint your wisdom or your honor. It's like something really bad got into something really good. Flies spread bacteria and disease. It's like we let something healthy and vibrant become diseased and necrotic. The worst part about it is that we don't have to let it happen. How do you keep the flies out? Simple: cover up the perfume. Value it; protect it; take care of it; keep it pure. Done that much lately in everything you do? Yeah, me neither. Sounds like you and I haven't taken care of some of the valuable things in our lives, like we haven't wisely tended to them or treated them with honor. Don't believe me?

Think about it. You're an honor student or a school athlete and you're caught cheating on a test. It's the first time you've ever done something like that but you gave into temptation and did it. How do you think your teachers, or the other people on your team, or the people around you will look at you? I bet you smell bad.

Or maybe you cheat on your spouse. Things have been rough around the house, you're tired of fighting and you just want someone to care about you. Trust me: there are always people out there who will 'care' for you. After the deed is done, how do you feel? If you have no conscience, maybe it doesn't bother you so much. If you have any kind of conscience at all, though, you're in trouble. You KNOW you've destroyed your honor, that your wisdom is worthless. And if someone finds out? Trust me (again): all hell breaks loose. At this point, you DO smell bad.

And what if you compromise your honor in some other way? A white lie, an extra day of per diem on your expense report, just a few miles over the speed limit, perhaps a little gossip about your best friend, even procrastinating on things you have to do or worry about things you don't: how does that feel? I hope you're bothered by such things. I am. Either I worry too much about small things, or even those small things compromise our honor. If you think about it, honor is a concept in which our current society is lacking. A society that glamorizes Honey Boo Boo, Jay Z rapping racial epithets in front of the president, and tabloid TV substituting for something of value has big problems with honor. So do you and I when we ingest that. If you compromise your honor, you smell like dead flies rotting in animal fat.

Yuck.

Time for a little wordplay, then, to see where the verse is implying we might go. "As perfume gives a sweet smell, so a little wisdom and honor outweighs folly." Just substituting a word and switching around a few gives a different perspective, don't you think? That perspective matters because the message matters. Our actions matter to God. Our actions don't save us; there is nothing you or I can do to earn His grace or His salvation. He gives it to matter what we do. But our actions still matter to him as evidence in knowing whether or not our

hearts are really involved. What we think, say and do matters because He wants us to love Him because we choose to, because we love to, not because we have to or as some demand/response/action/reward cycle.

A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor and when that happens, it stinks to high heaven. That little bit of foolishness – that bit of sin – tarnishes the knowing wisdom and honoring love that God shares with us. He wants better for us and He set the example for how to be better. Then He loves us anyway even when we are like dead flies in a jar of nard.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12 November 2012

The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 2.

Those who know my interests might quickly think that I'll go off on how this verse is endorsing a political viewpoint. Please. Let's go there, shall we: it isn't. If you're on the right, get over yourself. The Bible isn't endorsing your political point of view. If you're on the left, get over yourself. The Bible isn't endorsing your political point of view.

Can't we just agree that, in this verse, the words 'right' and 'left' are simply symbols of choices? They stand for sides, not for politics. Then again, we're people. Perhaps we CAN'T agree on that. I mean, if you tell me the sky is gray, I'll probably disagree with you. It's actually a hazy shade of bluish gray. If I tell you that dogs are better than cats, you might disagree with me because you like cats better.

Never the less, the verse says what it says and the words 'right' and 'left' really are just symbolic. If you believe in things right, conservative, or Tory, your heart isn't necessarily wise. If you believe in things left, liberal, or touchy-feely, your heart isn't necessarily foolish. Switch sides and it is still true. If you're left, your heart doesn't necessarily incline to wisdom, and if you're right, your heart doesn't necessarily incline to foolishness. You're simply on a side. Truth is colored in many shades even as it simply is what it is.

And the truth is we are polarized here in America. Writ large, we're polarized here on good old terra firma. We aren't polarized just by our politics: we are polarized because of sins. Last week we discussed how a few flies make perfume stink. How true is it, then, that a few lefts and rights stink it up as well. Me, I've been one of the stinkers. I've been one of those divisive people, and not just in my political talk. Even when I've been right, I've also been wrong too. As a church council member, I caused more division than cohesion; I wanted people to do better, but that's not the nature of any kind of government. At work, I don't tolerate stupidity very well. We all make mistakes, and ALL of them are understandable, even forgiveable. But I have a low pain threshold for stupidity, workplace politics and power plays. At home, I find that I have to work at holding my tongue, at not being too raucous, too raunchy, or too preachy. Instead of being a better husband and father, I'm not. In my faith walk, I find myself praying more for forgiveness because of things I've thought, said and done than I find myself praying in thanksgiving or even praying for others. I've made so many choices that pitted me on one side or another, far more than just trying to sway someone's political, social or cultural beliefs. Truth is, I find myself pretty polarized these days.

How about you? Has your meter ticked into the hot zone lately? Are you upright as Scripture defines upright? Are most of your words wise or are more than just a few foolish? How much time do you find yourself lined up on one side or another?

Yeah, I thought so. If you're in the right, is your 'right' measured by God or by you? Do you measure right against what God asks of you or against what you want for yourself? Is a 'right' something due to you or something you exercise, or is it a condition of living in God's grace? And if you're not right, are you being or doing wrong? Not left, wrong. If you are, what are you prepared to do about that?

And if you're not acknowledging that we are all bathing deeply in God's grace, that all of our right, our rights, being in the right, on the right, or being righteous are ALL wrong foolishness if we're in any way apart from God. What God wants for you and I isn't polarization or division. He wants us to find our common ground in Him by recognizing His adoration for us and how we need Him like water, food and air. In God we are one, not many, and not right or left. In God there is no wrong, only right. In God there are both the right and the rights, as well as the right side and the left side. We see multiple sides and many facets to the same God, but He is the same God no matter how we let ourselves look at Him.

It puzzles me that people find such talk challenging, and in some circles the things I've said here would be called 'hate speech.' Mind boggling; baffling; perplexing; sad. It is what it is, though, and in the long run, what I

say doesn't matter. What matters is what God says. What He says is always right, even if I'm to the human right or left of that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 November 2012

Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 3.

The fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is. Let's talk about David Petraeus, an honorable, good man who did something really stupid and now has made matters worse for his family and for his country. Let's talk about that guy who got a big R tattooed on his face, thinking his man would win the election but is now stuck with a re-elected incumbent he didn't want and a dorky face tattoo for the rest of his life. Let's talk about the woman who drives her car while the radiator is rattling like crazy and never thinks to check if there's fluid. Let's talk about the kid who gets told over and over again that some people & situations are poisonous but just gets drawn back to trouble like a moth to a flame.

Let's talk about me. I've done some pretty stupid things in my life. Not just ballpark stupid: we're talking all-out, nothing-held-back stupid. There was the time I decided to stand at the very end of the ship in 30 foot swells and I was almost washed overboard in the waters off Alaska. Or there was the time I poured hot oil on my knee from a popcorn popper. And then there was the time I tried to grab the cat in the bushes only to have him jump out and claw deeply into my face. Or the time I backed into the brand new conversion van? Or when I betrayed my wife. Or when I shot off my mouth in front of the CIO (even though I must admit it felt pretty good to tell him like it was...paid for it dearly). Do I need to go on?

And while we're at it, let's talk about you too. We're a regular dumb & dumber, you and me. I hope you're not gushing to confess all your repressed stupidity, and I hope you aren't TOO offended by shining a mirror on your un-glamorous moments. Still, I'm guessing you have a few memories that are less than heroic. Want to share them here? We could one-up each other on the stupid meter.

I hope not.

What's the point? Is this all just to demean? No, of course not. I think there are a few lessons to glean from today's little gem of wisdom. Lesson one is the most obvious: don't get too big for your britches. It's not that God wants to see us humiliated; he doesn't. Yet the Almighty isn't above knocking us down a notch or two, or letting us be knocked down to reduce our pride and nudge us back into his grace. When we get too big for ourselves, it can be a healthy thing to be brought back to reality. He wants us to depend on Him for everything, to trust Him for everything, not just when we think we need to. I think that's a lesson to draw from pointing out stupidity.

Another lesson: we're all fools now and then. Another true story of stupidity: in September, I was driving through eastern Ohio at 3 in the morning. It was pitch black, I was tired and strung out on caffeine, and I was blaring "It's Hard to Be Humble" from Mac Davis when the cop pulled me over. I was 20 over the speed limit; I still have to pay the ticket. Wouldn't you know, as soon as I pulled away, I turned on my iPod and heard "Everybody Plays the Fool." Sometimes God talks quietly and sometimes He lets us know that everybody plays the fool sometimes...it may be natural it may be cruel but I ain't lyin...listen baby! We all go south every now and then; we're human. Got skin, got sin. Got God? Got a way back home. When you get back on the road, stay under the speed limit.

Another: we all make mistakes and some mistakes are stupid, but making mistakes doesn't make us stupid. If we keep making them again and again without trying to learn, ok, maybe a reality (or an IQ) check is in order. But making mistakes doesn't make any of us stupid. One more time: we're human. One more time: Christ was human too...and also fully God at the same time. His example is our teaching example. His salvation makes our mistakes moot.

Finally, one last: all this is for good. Even when God tries to keep us between the lines, sometimes we do stupid things. Isn't it a small miracle how things always seem to turn out for the best? That isn't by chance. It's

divine. The supernatural is a natural part of this world, my friend, and it happens in our lives every day. Did you get home safely last night? There were literally millions of things that could have prevented you from getting home safely, yet somehow you made it back alive. I don't call that luck: I call it a miracle. The divine outwitted the stupid. Good matters. Good prevails. Good wins out no matter how hard we try to do stupid things. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite. We'll try again tomorrow.

And boy do we ever try. There are people who drive 70 on black ice and wonder why their brakes don't work. Or there are folks who keep pulling the trigger with the safety on. Or there are kids who cheat in school and wonder why they feel on edge all the time. Or there is anybody who smokes weed and wonders why they aren't a success. Or there are people who blindly follow lives of sin, thinking they'll be happy because of that, and are surprised to find out they're unhappy.

Me. You. Your spouse, your kids, your boss, your pastor, your in-laws, everyone you know. Stupid is as stupid does. Thank God for a Savior who makes stupid smart.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 14 November 2012

If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 4.

One of my favorite quote is from Winston Churchill. "Never, never, never give up." When war came to England, Churchill defiantly swore that the British people would never surrender. His words inspired a nation, bucked them up to resist the enemy and build the strength to overcome...and to win. He was calm and controlled, but oh so determined. Hitler wanted to rule; Churchill vowed to win. Hitler ended up with a bullet in his brain while Churchill endured and died an old man.

Stay the course. Man your position. When adversity comes – and it will come – be calm and do not abandon your post. Work to keep a cool head. It's common sense advice but it's Godly advice. You and me, let's not be the stupid fools walking down the middle of the road, demonstrating our stupidity. Instead, in the face of trouble, in the face of harshness from above, let's remain calm. Breathe deep, inhale and exhale. It's OODA loop time: Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. Be active in that loop.

Be active in it by first having faith. God has you where He has you for a reason. It's not to hurt you or hammer you, but it is for you to rely on Him, to serve, and to build you up. Be active in observing, orienting, deciding and acting by first relying on faith in His Providence to help you do those things. Submit to Him and listen to what He's telling you in the moment. He might speak through the wind, through words, through actions, through silence. Follow and be lead. In doing that, this also means that we need to prepare and be ready. You can't hold a position if you aren't prepared to do it. Inform yourself. Save. Purchase wisely. Store up supplies. More than any of this, be increased in your faith. Be in the Word every day. Read up, contemplate it, let it mold your heart and mind, and adjust your living by what it says you should do. Be better.

While we're at it, let's be calm and rest in faith. My dad turned me on to the Horatio Hornblower books. One of Hornblower's best traits (and abilities) was his calmness. Even under fire, Hornblower kept his head. He wasn't overactive and he wasn't rash. He was controlled and deliberate. That's what calmness does. It allows us to gain control of how we act in sometimes uncontrollable situations. Is it any surprise, then, that God implores us to remain calm? This is an ability that I struggle with. I constantly have to work to remain calm (especially when caffeinated). When real crises happen to us – and they do – if we act upon them calmly we are able to better do things for the good of those around us rather than simply reacting. It's very Horatio Hornblower. More than that, it's Godly.

And know this: it isn't all a bunch of clammy platitudes. This isn't lofty religious advice or idle talk or a bunch of crap for other people to do. It's for you too. It's for me. Let both of us calmly man our position in life and make the most of the moment. In doing so, we're living in a Godly way and minimizing errors we might otherwise make. You aren't an immoral or terrible person; there's nothing that's ever happened in your life or that you've done in your life that can make God hate you. He wants you and me to be with Him in this life and forever. He wants to lead us and infuse our lives with incredible, knowing, calming, life-living-changing love and He wants us to share that.

Rulers will get angry and you and I will cause them to anger. Maybe what you do today won't be directly known by President Obama today (or maybe it will). Maybe your governor won't know anything about you. Ditto your legislative representative, your mayor, or maybe even your city councilman (or woman). Maybe they will, but I doubt it. But your boss will, and your spouse will, and your God will. What we do matters, and behind that how we comport ourselves while doing what we do matters as well. Let's start by staying put when trouble comes, and acting calmly instead of reacting to someone else's game.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 16 November 2012

There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves. Ecclesiastes 10, verses 5 -7.

Let's put aside all arguments of envy here and now. By and large, merit pays. By and large, experience is rewarded with position, success, affluence (and influence) and rewards. In most things in life, we succeed because of hard work. God gives us talent or advantage or something, we faithfully use that something, and we are blessed. We're blessed because He chooses to bless us. If I might skate the razor edge a bit, I think it must make God happy to bless us by blessing our success. When we use our gifts in concert for His kingdom, the sky's the limit. By and large, merit is blessed; by and large, this is how the world works.

Hand in hand with that, how many times have you seen the world turned upside down? Along with success, it happens every day. In a time when times are bad, government doubles down on spending money we don't have. Politicians play chicken with the general welfare when that flies in the face of all good precedent. Dirtbag movie stars flit from divorce to divorce yet seem to become more glamorous because of it. At work, the guy you think will never be in charge is put in charge of a project out of his league. At school, the kid with no talent (but good connections) gets the starting position on the team, or maybe first chair in the band.

All these are as old as Eden. As long as we set people over ourselves, the mighty will fall and the lowly will rise. On the surface that's a good thing, a positive. Pride should be taken down a notch and the meek should inherit the earth for this is the will of God. What happens when we work to thwart God's will, replacing it with our pride? When that happens, the unqualified are advanced, the ill-prepared are placed in charge, and the unsuited are given control. It's like an Alice in Wonderland kind of reality, where clocks run backward and ought not to be is.

It's as old as Solomon's time as well, which as you know was many generations after Eden. In his time, Solomon saw how the rich were brought down and the poor uplifted. He was the wealthiest man in history, and perhaps this weighed on his mind; it would be understandable if it did. Yet what was he talking about? Just riches, material wealth, money & property?

Not hardly.

Hitler shouldn't have been the most powerful man in Europe but he was. Before him, Napoleon shouldn't have risen as he did, but he did. Torquemada shouldn't have wielded the power he did, but he did. In our own lives, scheming people shouldn't get what they want. The woman who uses men to get what she wants shouldn't get to live in sin and still be exalted in your church. The man who cheats on his taxes yet gets to keep the beautiful house with the manicured lawn. It's the total scumbag who becomes captain of the wrestling team. It's how those rich in sin seem to triumph over those poor in it.

It's about our sins, yours and mine both. It's a matter of pride, our unhealthy pride, when we put our judgment over what 'should be.' We see things happen in the world and don't understand it and we put our understanding before understanding that maybe He is working in ways beyond us. Doesn't it come back to our having issues with how God is working in our world? "But Lord." "Yeah, God, but what about..." See where it goes?

We all have sin. Whether we like it or not, we are ALL rich in sin, yet we put ourselves over Christ who had none. We do it in everything every day. I think THAT is really what Solomon was alluding to. We can get caught up in the material message but there's a more important one underneath it. We get caught up in it because, in a right world – and in this one, for the most part – we want merit to pay. We want to be rewarded for faithful living and using our talents well, and this is a righteous expectation. How about let's keep it righteous by laying it at God's feet and asking Him to guide us when we feel the sense of jealousy coming on?

No matter who's at the top of the heap, how about we be thankful to be where we are and ask God to guide us upward no matter where upward is in the journey?

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 26 November 2012

Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. Ecclesiastes 10, verses 8 and 9.

Happy Week After Thanksgiving, my friend. The feast is over and the dishes are (hopefully) done. The weekend is gone; the manic shopping focus out of focus for another year. Today, we get back to work; today will find me on an airplane, flying back to work in Minnesota. What do you say after a long weekend of thankful revelry?

How about: be careful. That's part of what today's verses is saying.

I think "be careful" could sum up my parents approach to childhood. My mom and dad constantly exhorted me to be careful in everything I did. In some cases, it was way overprotective. I was an extremely cautious child, sometimes afraid of my own shadow. That's something I learned at home. Mind you, I am not blaming my parents; they did the best they could and did what they thought was right. That and, like everyone, I had choices. Still, I was brought up to always be careful in everything. Don't play football: you might get hurt. Don't make waves: you might lose. Don't take too many risks: they just aren't worth it. Don't stand up to the bully: he's bigger than you. I remember one time my mom and I drove up on a highway entrance ramp just as a semi-truck was flipping over onto its side. She stopped the car and I quickly bolted out the door. My only thought was to get to the cab and help out if I could. I took off at a full sprint but then I heard Mom yelling from behind me: "don't get hurt! Be careful!" It literally took the wind out of my sails, and I ran up to the cab as the driver was pulling himself out, shaken but unharmed.

Don't. See the common thread?

My parents didn't intend to inculcate me with over-cautiousness, but they did it; like I said, they were doing their best. In many ways, they were being prudent. That prudence can be both a Godly and desirable thing in many cases; in some, it isn't. If you take a quick read of today's verses, you might walk away thinking that they're in favor of an overly-cautious approach to life. My cautious parents might agree with it. It's a good thing to encourage safety, and preparation, and caution in approaching most dangerous situations.

But temper that good advice with remembering that nothing in Scripture advises cowardice, selfish caution, or personal safety over self-sacrifice. If anything, believers are encouraged to be confident in God, brave, and fearless. We are told to be cautious when dealing with things of the world, namely when dealing with sin or even the hint of sin. Yet when an opportunity is before us to serve, even if it means putting ourselves or our safety in jeopardy, we are to check the situation against our faith in God and let Him lead us where He will. We are to indeed be bold and serving, selfless and able.

Now would be a good time, then, to re-read those verses and think of them in that context. If you are careless when you dig a pit, you might fall into it. If you are working in an area with snakes and you don't take precautions, you might get bitten. If you're quarrying recklessly, you might get hurt. If you're cutting logs carelessly, you might be endangered by them. See the common thread there again? Carelessness is sin. It's pride, it's vanity; it's really a kind of idolatry, of 'me first' thinking that puts ourselves before God.

The common denominator there is 'don't be careless.' It isn't "don't" period: it is "don't be careless." In a way, my parents over-cautious exhortations tried to say that. Don't be careless, reckless or foolish, but also don't let those things get in the way of boldly, selflessly serving. I wasn't mature enough at the time to see that, and they didn't do much to explain the difference. Every moment in life is a gift from God, even the moments of danger. Our mission in this world is to give glory to Him in every one of them, whether it's giving glory by cautiously watching from the sideline when we know we can't get involved, or whether it's throwing caution to

the wind and running towards the sound of the gunfire. In all situations, in every moment, we should focus on moving forward in faith by avoiding carelessness and cherishing God's confidence.

So, on this Monday after the start of the holiday season, I'll carefully advance in my workplace, in my words with friends and foes alike, and in how I use the gifts God gives to me. Today is a good day to be bold, to continue to be thankful for where He has me in life, but to also be cautiously – yet boldly – hopeful and confident about anything the new day presents. I think even my parents would agree with that.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 27 November 2012

If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 10.

You know, I like to say that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Really. I'm not. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed either; I suppose that's a play on the same phrase. There are folks better than I am, and there are many who aren't as sharp as I am. It's a statement of humility, but it's also a statement of reality. Yet God can do something with even dull, unsharpened me. He can do it because He's God and skilled. He can also do it because, as Proverbs 27 says, "Iron sharpens iron." God is the ultimate iron and the ultimate knife. I don't know about you, but I could use a little sharpening.

Good to know. See, nearly all the tools in my toolbox are dull. My saws need sharpening. My hedge trimmers need sharpening. My knives need sharpening and my utility knives need new blades. If you go into my kitchen, you'll find more of the same. There are dull knives and dull scissors. It's not all because I've used them carelessly, that is, that I haven't kept them up. No, it's more because of over-use and circumstance that these once-sharp implements have become dull and rounded on the edges.

Ditto, I'm afraid, on things you won't find in a tool box or knife drawer. I'm afraid that my prayer skills are lacking from time to time. I pray daily, but some times more than others, and when I'm away from it in focused effort, well, I'm afraid my prayer skills start to ebb. Sometimes when I pray, I feel distant from God. It feels like I'm just talking, not connecting, maybe even like I'm a fool. When that happens, it gets easy to fall away.

Thank God He's skilled, strong, and successful using weakened prayer warriors like me.

And my intelligence isn't all it's cracked up to be either. All those years of school should present themselves in evidence better than me. More often than not, despite all my years of charm school and refinement, I shoot off my mouth at the wrong time, or I don't recollect even simple things that I think a better man would know. Sometimes I think that, if it weren't for Google or the talents of others, I wouldn't be successful at much of anything worthwhile. I'm smart, but sometimes I don't think I'm quite smart enough.

Thank God He's skilled, strong, and successful using less-than-genius people like me.

Then there are my hopes and dreams. Even at middle age, I still have many that are unfulfilled. I'd like to plant a vineyard and an olive grove, but time seems to be running out if there's to be time to actually glean a living from fully grown plants. I'd like to learn how to rebuild a car engine but I don't yet have either the tools or the time. I'd like to travel the world with my wife, maybe even run The Amazing Race with her, but I don't really know how we would each get time off from work. The older I get the more I feel that my hopes and dreams for what I'd like to do in this world will forever remain just ethereal, dreamish, and unfulfilled.

Thank God He's skilled, strong and successful using procrastinating dreamers like me. I think you can figure out how this goes.

See, God expects perfection out of us, and whether we want to admit it or not, we aren't perfect. I'm not razor-sharp, I'm not even a Ginsu knife. More often than not, I'm that dull paring knife in the back of the drawer. I don't know about you, but I'm not perfect. I try, but I'm not, and to tell you the truth, sometimes I don't really even try very hard (if at all). God sees it. He still expects perfection because He is perfection in skill, in life and in love. He expects it but understands we don't deliver it. He then infuses our lives with His grace and mercy. And He sharpens us to do better.

That makes it ok. He meets me where I am, instead of demanding I do something to meet Him where He is. Where I'm weak, He is strong. He sharpens me, refines me, knocks off my rust and polishes away my tarnish. And He hones the edge of my soul to a fine blade. Where I start out with little skill, He builds me up so that,

even when I find myself using the dull tools at my disposal, I'm a better man because of Him. What skills I have are gifts from above and He helps me to hone them, to use them better so that even the dull blade I use can be used skillfully by the man I am who can be a dull blade himself.

That way, even the dullest knife in the drawer can be useful.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 28 November 2012

If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 11.

I read several commentaries on this verse. All were united in saying that this is a verse of sarcasm. Sarcasm is one thing I understand well. It's practically a second language to me, and taming my sarcastic tongue is one of my greater challenges (as well as one of my bigger faults). What the commentaries said was that, if you read the verse and those around it, you see how King Solomon sarcastically made fun of fools while spelling out, yet again, some of the consequences of being foolish.

But one commentary said something that really hit home. To paraphrase, it basically said that all the planning in the world is pointless if you don't execute the plan very well. How we do what we're supposed to do actually counts. The illustration of the snake biting its charmer is the ancient illustration of a plan gone wrong.

Have you ever had things turn out different from what you'd planned? I'm sure you have, and I hope I'm not being presumptuous in saying that. I hope I'm not presumptuous because, well, I don't want to be the only one with my hand in the air waving "yes." I'm currently managing a project that is several weeks behind. I'd hoped we would be live by now, but we aren't. When it was least desirable for it to happen, the snake turned on the charmer.

Finances are extremely tight around the house these days because of a cascading series of events. It wasn't supposed to be this way; working all the hours I do was supposed to earn far more, but it hasn't. But circumstances have led to us being where we are. I'm responsible for that. There's that snake again.

Last night, I was sleepy during the evening but then awake when I should have been asleep. It meant that I slept much more than I usually do and now I'm feeling groggy. Sssssssssss...ouch!

See what I mean? I could go on with a dozen examples of how things in life haven't turned out as planned. In the end, it'd be a maudlin, whiny list of complaints; in the end, I'm the one responsible for the mistakes I've made in this life, and only I can answer to my God when He judges me; in the end, He will be all that matters.

Which is why it's important to remember that it's a prudent thing to plan but that sometimes plans don't turn out the way they're supposed to. The snake charmer practices over and over so the snake will memorize the feel of the sound of the flute (since snakes don't have ears). Both charmer and serpent practice this dance until it looks like man has control over the beast when, in reality, it's just a practiced routine to earn a few shekels...that is, until the something goes awry in the routine and the snake decides to strike.

In today's world, the snake could be anything. The storm arrives early, a car careens into your lane, an unexpected bill arrives in the mail, the test comes back positive, you name it: plans are perfect until they are executed, then real life takes over. It's important to remember that, when the snake senses something is out of whack, or that it can get the best of the charmer, that the charmer should be prepared for evasive action.

And it's important to remember, too, that we, as snake charmers, need to praise God when we're charming well or when the snake bites. That's the other part of the deal; that, too, takes practice. We should train up, prepare up, be ready and know our skill when we use it. When we do that, we need to remember to praise God for that. The gift of practice is a good one indeed. Likewise, when the bite hurts, when we make mistakes, when random things happen, or when we feel alone, we need to remember to praise God for His close presence, and for his guiding patience.

This could be the point where I write some smarmy, sarcastic quip about how patience can outwit the snake, but it won't be. I'm not sure what a commentary would have to say about that, but in the long run it doesn't really matter. Today, let's you and I do our best to practice our snake charming, and maybe wear long gloves when we're around that pesky cobra. Now, where's my flute?

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 29 November 2012

Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—and the fool multiplies words. Ecclesiastes 10, verses 12 – 14.

I was surfing the web last night and watched a disturbing presentation. It was a sales pitch to sell a survivalist course, and while it was only narrated black text on a white background, I found it to be graphic and unsettling. No, I won't share the link here; I'm not into spreading that kind of hype. And there wasn't a hit of profanity or filth in the thing. But the message was stark and unforgiving: the US financial system is collapsing and chaos, martial law, famine, and worse are looming in the next few months. The kind of disorder that will result from the US defaulting on its debt has never been seen here before. The video talked about how the government is quietly preparing for martial law and massive civil unrest if the US defaults, which seems more and more likely. Naturally, they were using fear to get you to buy their guide (I didn't) but the whole thing left me feeling quite uneasy, questioning whether I was one of the people prepared to survive if things ever get bad.

So tell me, my friend, by talking about this presentation, am I a fool consumed by his own lips, a wise man who is gracious, or something else? I mean, yesterday's writing was about being prepared, about practicing to charm the snake. Today's talks about how garrulous fools (like me?) ramble on and on and make themselves look stupid (as well as detracting from God and wasting your time). Yet is it a foolish thing to talk about these uncomfortable matters of chaos, survival, and outcome? Or should I ignore the website as just another crank attempt by someone with a little too much time on their hands (along with the motivation to get rich)?

Answer: yes to both.

The overriding theme of chapter 10 (so far) is mocking foolishness. Each of the verses we've talked about has mocked foolishness even as they contrast it with how we need God. The chapter uses several different examples – dead flies in perfume, the foolish ruler, the dull axe, and the snake charmer to name a few – to paint vivid pictures of what foolishness looks like. Verses 12 through 14 are no different. Anything apart from God, whether it's my daydreaming about what I could do with that Powerball money or my evil thoughts about that woman who works a few cubes over from me, or whether it's your scheming to get back at that guy who did you wrong, anything apart from God is sin. The Ecclesiastes extension of that truth is that anything apart from God is also foolishness. Logically speaking, that means sin is foolishness, and foolishness is sin.

And let's keep it real here: our world is full of foolishness. The US spends half a billion dollars this week on that lottery. California votes itself higher taxes when the economy there is already in the toilet. We pay \$300 cash per month for cell phone bills but we charge groceries on a credit card and we can't pay our mortgages. Five people drive into an intersection to turn when the stoplight turns red. Somewhere (actually in many somewhere's) two married people hop in the sack with people other than their spouses. Children tell their parents "no." Do I need to keep on going? Our American nation is full of foolishness. Go overseas, where good land sits idle while millions starve and you'll see plenty of foolishness there too.

All those things start with words because words mean things. God spoke all creation into existence. Words will get you married, arrested, acquitted, into the military, in trouble or exonerated. Fools multiply their words if only to hear themselves talk. Over-talking (or over-writing) can be a sin, especially if it doesn't expand on a point, or contribute to understanding. If I beleaguer a point, I'm sinning; when I beleaguer a point, I'm foolish. Imagine that.

Don't just imagine it, though: live it. Put it into action today by remembering it, then adjusting accordingly. To that end, I've been enough of a fool. I don't want to be a fool anymore. Let the words speak from themselves because I hope God uses them to speak to your heart. That, more than any dire warning, is how we prepare for calamities.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 November 2012

A fool's work wearies him; he does not know the way to town. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 15.

Awhile back – actually it was a few years ago now – my friend, Patrick, preached at church sermon on vocation. It stuck with me because he was talking about how work is a Godly thing, about how we each have a vocation, not just a job, and how that vocation (our working in it) can be a thing of worship.

Do fools feel that way? Do we? I mean, I don't hold with the way of thinking that hates Monday, hates working 40 hours a week, hates having to clock in, and hates the idea of having to work. To me, that seems like a class warfare attitude, not a healthy or realistic way of looking at something necessary. I don't look at my life as 'a gimme.' I was put here to do something, to earn my way in the world. It's true that I wouldn't have picked the career I'm in if someone had told me what it would be like way back when I was sixteen. It's also true that, with the career I'm in, I and my family (and even some others around me) have been undeniably blessed. Good things have come from the jobs my wife and I do, even the ones and the times when we didn't like what we were doing. In this world, we have to work to survive. Not only, we were created to be blessed by work, not cursed by it.

In my blindered-way of thinking, only a fool would let his work weary him. This isn't talking about long days, or when you've given all you have to give and 'they' still want more, or giving it your best and that not being enough. If you work, you have days like these; maybe even whole jobs like these. Instead, it's calling out folks who are antagonistic to work. Those who see work as a burden, a curse, or something negative miss the point of work: it's a gift of God intended to bring Him glory and us improvement.

Thus, it shouldn't be surprising to stand behind the guy who grumbles about having to clock in at the start of his shift and be turned off by his negativity. It shouldn't be surprising to find that the arguments of folks who rail against success or achievement are usually based on envy and antagonism. People who let their work weary them, who look at it as a bad thing, are fools. And like we said yesterday, all things apart from God are sin, and all sin is foolishness. Living a negative outlook towards work is, therefore, sinful. If this is your outlook, not only don't you know the way to town: you may not know the way to heaven.

It also shouldn't be surprising that when you have a great day at work, you know you've done a good thing. You feel good about it. When you finish a hard task, you feel fulfilled. That's no coincidence: it's a blessing. If we dig into learning about what we'll do in heaven, should it be surprising to learn that we will probably have work to do there, that it'll be God-glorifying and human-fulfilling work to do in an eternity of praise, wonder and adventure? Work can be something to look forward to. In fact, we should look forward to it. Just ask anyone who's unemployed: they would love to work but can't. They get it.

God bless the folks who work because they are financially strapped, or because they are striving for something better, or because they're doing the only thing they know how to do to provide for their families. Those folks are doing the Lord's work. But the next time you or I stand behind the grumbler or listen to the complainer, how about we offer up a prayer for their encouragement, and then remind ourselves that their outlook is flawed and that there is a better way.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 3 December 2012

Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time— for strength and not for drunkenness. Ecclesiastes 10, verses 16 and 17.

What does this mean? I'll take a short encouragement about government from it. It's been nearly a month since the Federal election here in America. In that time, the folks who re-elected the president have had time to be satisfied in their choice, and to gloat, and to look forward to four more years of their man's policies. The folks who voted for other people, well, they're probably not as satisfied.

But we have who we have, and here in the US of A, we the people are responsible for whoever we send into government. I will admit cynicism enough to see that the politicians have rigged the system to their advantage; how else can you explain so many appointed government officials, Congressmen and cabinet officers who arrive in Washington with modest means and depart with great wealth? And even when that is the case, we the people are still responsible for them.

Woe to us, then, who allow weak people, men and women of low character or lazy bearing, to govern and rule over us. We get what we deserve. Blessed is our land, then, when we elect people of good character and diligent ways to govern, to rule, and to use the power we entrust to them for the advancement of the nation. We aren't the first nation to recognize, benefit, or suffer from this. Indeed, the US will not last forever. But blessed is the country that installs leaders of good quality into positions of high trust. That's how it has always been.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 4 December 2012

If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 18.

I have news for King Solomon: this sometimes happen anyway. Knowing that, maybe it's a good idea to take away from the verse the idea that industry and thrift help to store up the moxie to deal with the times when the rafters will sag and the house will leak anyway.

You see, I have a hard time relaxing. Yesterday, I put in a full day of regular work. During that day (because I was working from home this week) I took Son Bull to school, ran a book back to his school, did three loads of laundry, washed the comforter, ran to the library to get books, made a number of phone calls, baked 15 dozen Christmas cookies, did a mountain of dishes, baked a cake for my son, picked the son up from school, cooked dinner (fish, green beans and potatoes), did some cleaning around the house, ran to do some errands, cleaned my desk, installed a towel hook, helped with the ironing, and wrote two columns. I also had morning devotions with my wife and had breakfast with her afterwards. It's no wonder I feel exhausted. That's just one day.

I used to make lists of things I would do. It was an insecurity thing, and it drove my wife bonkers. Thankfully, it's a habit I've been blessed to break, but I list my day's activities here to make a point. When there's work to be done, we should do it. If there are things that need to be done in our homes, we should do them, get them done.

While we're doing those things, don't forget that eternity matters most. Stop, breathe, and just take in God. Breathe Him in and out, and let Him both calm & fuel you. Relax, then get going again.

Sure, there are times and places to relax. God gave us one full day in seven to do just that, and we're fools – sinful even – if we don't use that time to rest. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The rest of the time? Git r done, thank you very much. We were made to work, and we were made to make use of our time, to be industrious. We weren't made to live off the work of another, or to have someone else do our earning and providing for us if we can do it ourselves. No, we were made in the image of God to bring Him glory and ourselves profit from what we do in this time by using our talents for improvement: improvement of God's glory, improvement of others, our improvement.

We were made to do these things because we live in a fallen world where, if we don't do them, the rafters sag and the roof leaks. Hard work generally pays off. But even if you build something wonderful, it immediately begins to decay. Even thousand-year old buildings of stone and brick will one day come down. This is the way of a fallen nature. Besides, storms happen, things happen, life happens. Just ask anyone who's ever lived through a tornado, or a fire, or some kind of accident. Things happen that upset even the chaotic nature of nature. Things happen that make our foundation crack and our roofs sag. Thus, we are to use our industry and our talents and our time to build well and build up to forestall disaster and decay and make good use of the gifts God gave to us. If God purposes something into our lives, even things that are random to us, there is nothing we can do to stop it. What we can do is cling to Him, and cling to Him by the things we think, say and do.

In addition to our talents, we can use our faith to do the things of life while including relaxing and resting in God to help us through the tough times.

I'll remember that when I try to relax this week. It is wedding week here in north Texas, sort of like Shark Week but without the salt water. My daughter is getting married and there is much still to be done to get ready. Relaxation time is at a minimum, yet even in the middle of the wedding whirlwind, it's there. Many people have worked hard to make sure the rafters of the reception hall aren't falling in and that the new couple gets to start out under a roof that doesn't leak. In the middle of it all, and around it all, and through & within & because of it

all, there is God. Today, conscious that hard, industrious work is necessary in our busy world, let's try to remember that a few quiet moments with the Father every day are just as necessary.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 5 December 2012

A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 19.

As I mentioned yesterday, this week is wedding week here at my house. My daughter is getting married this weekend, and we are all knee-deep in executing plans, doing things, and shopping for the weekend. Family starts arriving today and the wedding schedule officially kicks off tomorrow. There will be much revelry, family gossip, probably plenty of stress, and feasting. The rehearsal dinner is Thursday, and I am sure there will be laughter. Friday night, after the wedding, we'll have a grand reception where the wine will flow freely. Ditto Saturday night, when wine will flow freely again at my house (specifically hot gluewein in the family wine pot) because my loved ones will all gather here again for one last get-together before they all go their own ways on Sunday. Paying for all this are many almighty dollars: months of bonus work, extra hours, and scrimping. It's always expensive to get married, especially if you want to 'do it right.'

After all, like the verse says, money is the answer for everything, right? Not quite.

You know it isn't. In the season for Christmas shopping, Christmas parties, or even Christmas weddings, you know deep inside that money isn't the answer for everything. Spend a thousand bucks (or fifteen thousand of them) and you may have quite a lot of stuff but it leaves you feeling unfulfilled. So you know where I'll be going with this short missal (and I promise it will be short). Keep the money, please. It really doesn't buy happiness. Yesterday, I spent a princely sum on things we need for the weekend, and at the end of it I felt sort of frustrated. I went to 7 different stores to pick up things that we'll be glad to have, and I really didn't even splurge. It just cost a lot of money. 'The age of hope and change' should be called 'the age of inflation and expensive.' Stop me if I'm wrong but hasn't everything gone up in price this year? It simply costs more to live now than it did just four or so years ago. Quite frankly, if money is the answer for everything, then the question is pretty messed up.

Clearly, it isn't the answer, and it isn't because there's more to this rock than just what it takes to get by. You don't spend a bunch of dough to impress people: you spend it because you love them, because you want the people most important to you to have a good time and enjoy themselves. It's rare for my entire family to get together all in one place. In fact, in the 23 years I've been married, it's never happened that all of my wife's family and mine got together, let alone joining ours with the extended family of our son-in-law. In 2012 America, it just doesn't happen that often, so you want to do what you can to build the background for the occasion to go smoothly, and for people to celebrate, and visit, and just love. When you do this, take a few minutes to step back and realize it is a blessing given to you from above. It's a God thing. Thank the Lord that He helps us do what we can.

Thank Him because life is like the story of the Grinch. If memory serves, it was the Grinch who thought that if he took all the Who's stuff, they would stop Christmas. When he did, something unexpected happened. "Maybe, thought the Grinch, Christmas means something a little bit more." The Grinch starts out as a miserable, angry, ugly fluff of green on legs. He fails to see through the hollow materialism of feasting, wine, revelry and things. The real meaning of Christmas, that intangible love, shines through once the Grinch stole Christmas and found out that all he had was a fat bag on top of Mount Crumpet. That changed everything.

Stuff isn't the answer. Money isn't the answer. Feasting and good wine aren't it either. Jesus is the answer and when He answers, it makes all the rest of it look trivial.

So it is with wedding week as well. Take away the dress, the tuxedos, the open bar, the gluewein, the canapés, the candlelit chapel, and all the trappings of a December ceremony. Take all those away and the only thing that matters is that two people will join their Lord in a sacrament of holy matrimony. My wife and I will be there. So will the groom's large family. You'll be there in our thoughts. And the Lord will be there too, joining with the couple in a marriage covenant of three, not just two. That will make it all very worthwhile.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 6 December 2012

Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say. Ecclesiastes 10, verse 20.

Lots of folks in the world today think things are getting bad. If you're reading this blog today, or if you're reading it via email, this message came to you electronically. I'm no conspiracy theorist, yet even I am cognizant of the fact that all electronic communications are routed through servers that can be monitored. Data mining has been going on for decades now, and if someone – government, private, criminal, whoever – takes an interest in you, anything you do online is available for them to see. Face it: you're being monitored, you can be tracked, and 'they' can see what you say, transact, and do. Some of 'them' aren't your friends, too. Some of 'them' don't have your good welfare in mind. That too is simply a fact of life in the internet age.

Trouble can swoop down on you in a heartbeat. If you say things that are unpopular, does that mean we should ratchet them back? Maybe or maybe not.

Did you know that only one of Jesus' apostles died of old age? The Apostle John, he of the Book of John, 1-3 John and Revelation, died an old man, and he was the only one of the Twelve to be blessed to do so. The rest of his friends and peers all died martyrs, murdered for what they believed and said. They were murdered by the authorities of the day in Judea, in Rome, and in Africa and Asia. You and I know there are many lessons to be drawn from this, but the one in context of today is especially important: watch your words.

It's a terrible thing to fear authority, but in a sinful and fallen world, we need to. In this case, it's not talking just about that respect flavor of fear: this verse is talking about genuine trepidation. Later in history, the Apostle Paul said "Government does not bear the sword for nothing; it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil." God uses government for His purposes, and the government we have – even an overbearing, over-intrusive and sometimes tyrannical one – is in power for more than just an electoral majority. Government is the agent of God. In an age when the government can see, read, and listen to almost anything you say, it's wise to remember this.

It's not that we should never speak out against government, or stand idly by while the government does evil things. I just reading finished a book about Christians in Nazi Germany, which made the valid point that the Lutherans, Catholics, and other believers in the 1930s understood exactly what Hitler was planning and doing. They were silently complicit in the evil that resulted. Had enough people spoken against it, perhaps the Holocaust might not have happened, or at least more might have been saved; we will never know. Things were as bad as they could get just 80 years ago, and according to Scripture, they will get bad again. Before history comes to a close, things will become worse than they have ever been.

We get to look forward to that.

Until that time, we also get to cling to belief and live our lives accordingly. These days, when I rail against politicians, or speak out about issues, or opine about Scriptures, I am cognizant of this fact. I'm also cognizant of knowing that someone, somewhere can read these words whenever they like, plucking them out of the electronic atmosphere and doing with them what they will. It's my prayer that they'll act as God would have them do, not as the government might dictate. No matter what happens, may a higher will than mine, may God's will, be done.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 7 December 2012

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. Ecclesiastes 11, verses 1 and 2

Today I'm writing these words specifically for my daughter and new son-in-law. Tonight I'll walk Gretchen down the aisle, she'll leave her childhood behind, and start the best part of her life. This morning, I was driving up from Dallas, alone, and I had time to reflect on what I'll say at the wedding reception this evening, and how I feel about it all. Wedding plans are so hectic, and they usually involve much more effort than you imagine they will. It's not hard to get lost in the shuffle of doing things and forget to reflect on why you're doing them, and what it all really means. When I read the verses for today, I got a glimpse of what life and marriage really means, and a little of what I would like to say tonight. More to the point, I am reminded of a few things I would hope for the new couple to remember.

The first thing I want them to remember is that they are marrying each other, but also marrying the Lord. More than just two people will stand in front of the minister tonight. Beside them, joining their hands, wrapping His arms around them, will be Christ Himself. God not only joins them in the union: God is their union. The same Jesus, the crucified man of antiquity, will be there in spirit and even in body as they swear vows of fidelity before Him. He will partner with them in their new covenant, and will be a part of what keeps them together. He will unite them, encourage them, rebuke them, celebrate with them, cry and grieve with them, make love and make a life with them.

Then, I want them to remember that everything that will happen to them in their lives will be in God's hands. He will always be in control, and he will always be at work, active, and in a high purpose. When the tough days come – and they will – Jesus will be the one on whom their cares will rest and through whom they can build a better future. Life will present challenges and crises, celebrations and times of true joy. God incarnate will be at work in all of them, even when He might seem hard to see. Nothing in the unwritten pages up ahead will happen without His involvement or without His desire for them to cleave close to Him.

Finally, I would like them to remember to do what these verses exhort. Cast your life, your love, your means, and your wealth on the waters for it will always come back much richer. Do not be afraid, and always trust that God will provide for you. Tough times will come and hard days will be yours to live. Life will be replete, but complete, with days of joy like today but also days of many tears, much sorrow, and even death. My wife and I had a good marriage that went bad, and then became very, very good again when we learned to turn to Him and rest all ourselves on Him. It's not just success and material things with which God blesses us: it is Himself, and that pure love that is the essence of His soul. When we came to know that, nothing else seemed quite as important, even the everyday important cares of finances, responsibilities, schedules, jobs, and family. When we learned to share God, God always came back to us in far more than we gave out.

And that's the biggest lesson of all.

I'm the father of the bride today, and I'm as proud as I ever thought I could be. Let me be the first to say "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Tew." I love you both very much. May God bless you more than you understand, and may all your days be filled with laughter, fun, blessings, good times and God's love.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 11 December 2012

If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 3

In the week after Wedding Week, it's good to hear that some things simply speak for themselves. Some of those things are like the wedding itself, which was beautiful and one of the most fun, moving days of my life. Thankfully the weather held. Thankfully we didn't trip when I walked my girl down the aisle. Thankfully nobody (except me) made a big fool of themselves at the reception. Thankfully it's all over now so we can get some rest. Thankfully, it speaks for itself that God joined a young man and woman in love and created a marriage for them: something that can last for the rest of their lives and bring untold blessings to many.

Or there's another thing that speaks for itself, namely that I'm back to work, back on the road again this week and ready to get back to the task at hand. I'd like to live in a permanent state of not having to work at what I do for a living, but that's just not how things are. And I'm content to live knowing that God has me where He has me for a reason. I'm serving others in a larger capacity even when I don't always feel motivated to do the job. Work is what it is, we were made to work, and there is a time to work (just as there is a time for relaxation, or relaxation's opposite which is known as "a wedding"). That simply speaks for itself.

Here in Minnesota, yesterday the clouds were full of water: frozen water. They poured a foot of it as snow overnight, and the temperature when I landed last night was just above zero. It's pretty when it's falling; it's pretty on the ground; it's pretty cold for it to stick around, and it's pretty much a mess to drive in. But snow speaks for itself. It simply is what it is.

And isn't that just the case in so much of life? Life is what it is. Life is, and it speaks for itself. So it is with the Bible, and specifically this verse. It's a common sense statement about things that simply happen and just are. Cause and effect; one thing leading to another; this and that: what happens in life just happens. If it's cloudy enough, it will precipitate. If a tree falls, it falls down and stays down. Work can be tough, weddings are beautiful, and snow is cold. We can accept things like these because they're easy to understand and make sense.

Why do so many people not feel that way about Scripture? Why is it so difficult to conceive that the Bible says what it says and is what it is: the actual words of God? If we can accept things of the world as they are, why is it so difficult for us to accept that the creator of the world is who He says He is? The more I read of Him, the more I see He is who He says He is, who He said He was to our ancestors, to fellow believers all around us, and in the glory of His creation.

I guess there are some things that speak for themselves but people just don't want to understand. After all, God is who He is – that's even His name, the great I AM – yet we resist trying to understand that, or really letting the simple fact of Him love, envelop, and determine us where we are, who we are. Maybe that's the point of the verse: pointing out that there are some things that are simply common sense and accepted for what they are, including the Lord. It's not a difficult concept. The difficult part is our letting go.

Today I go back to work. In a few hours, I go back to my client site and resume my place on the corporate healthcare treadmill. My inbox will be full of emails, meeting invitations, and the hundred small crises and challenges that are part of working in information services. By noon, the wonderful wedding last week will begin to recede into memory. My wife goes back to her job of being understaffed, over-houred, and always stressed. In addition to the good things that come with work, there are these not good things that are just as much a part of working. They're common sense and just what they are. So, too, is the constant presence of Him who is not indifferent or silent in those challenges. He's at work in them, at work drawing us closer, teaching us valuable lessons, and reminding us of His unending love.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 12/12/12

Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 4.

This is a follow-up to yesterday's verse which, if you remember, talked about things happening and them being what they are: common sense events in our lives. Today is both a coda on that thought as well as something more.

First the coda. It follows that it does no good to watch the wind that felled the tree, or stare at the clouds that pour the rain because they've done what they've done and it's over, in the past. This is a land of the living and a place where, to live, you must work. Staring at the sky isn't much work, even if you're a weather man. It may expand your knowledge of current conditions, and that may help to build long-term knowledge, or to predict what will happen in a few minutes. But, by and large, it doesn't increase your productivity, and it doesn't really do much to increase knowledge of God to others. Thus, it follows that just watching the world go by really isn't doing much IN the world. We were made to be in the world, just not of it. If we stand idly by, things don't get done.

But there's more; did you catch it? It isn't the subtle admonition against idleness, and it isn't the endorsement of agriculture, and it isn't even the continuation of verse 3. It isn't the wind or the clouds that make things work: it is the force behind them. The wind could not blow and the clouds could not rain if they were not made so. The force behind the wind, the clouds, and any worldly element is God, and God is both behind the elements as well as part of them, through them, before and after them. God IS the elements, and the elemental truth of nature.

As well as the elemental truth of human activity. Planting is a deliberate act, something Adam was taught to do in Eden, something passed down through eons of time. Deliberately cultivating one's food is a distinctly human activity, one the animals are incapable of recreating. They can hunt and forage, but when the livestock or plants are gone, so are the hunters and foragers. Not so man. God made us to use His creation for His glory through our betterment. Nothing we do can be apart from God because while we can cultivate seeds and nourish plants (using God's elements of nature), we can't create life. Only God can create life and use life to further life. It's a picture of what He does for us each day.

And there's even more than that. We were made to help things grow, we were made for the harvest. The wind, the clouds, even the world were made to be at our disposal, for us to tend and improve, to gain a harvest. We were made to master the world, including subduing it to gain our food. It's true that the wind can blow and rain can fall without our cultivating it, while our cultivation needs the wind and rain. It's also true that the wind and rain and the earth in general are blessings at our disposal, to harness for food sources as well as energy, replenishment, and nourishment for the earth itself. Those elements that sustain life were put here for us to use to produce a harvest. That's true whether it's food from the field, or supporting the Lord of the harvest as he sows groups of believers in His Word.

Besides, isn't the verse an allegory to life itself? We were made for the harvest, not for standing idle. A life not shared is a life unremembered. And an unremembered life is pointless. When we don't share, we don't give God the opportunity to increase the blessings He's given to us; they're squandered. How many times have you said to yourself "I wish I had said something" or "I wish I had done something" when you're replaying the past in your head? In each moment, prayerfully say or do, letting the wind and the storm carry you where it will. Wherever it carries us, we're covered and joined by God, who is over, in and through all things, even the wind and the rain.

Today is a fresh day, another miracle of opportunity for us to either stand and watch, or join in and act. There are times for both, and it isn't wise to rashly do either, or to do either apart from where He leads us. Only by submitting each moment to God, by involving Him in our lives, can we really know when to pause and when to

jump in. I'll pray that you do that, that you go to Him today and ask Him to guide you, to walk with you, to watch the parade go by when you should and to join in and celebrate when He moves you.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 13 December 2012

As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 5.

Some things are bigger than us.

Yesterday was 12/12/12. Many people attach significance to such oddities as a date on the calendar that is synchronistic or unique. Other than the North Koreans testing a nuclear missile, nothing earth-shattering happened. It was just a typical day, yet I read stories all day long about what an extraordinary day it was simply because of the way the calendar lined up. There will not be another 12/12/12 until December 21, 2112, 99 years and 364 days from today. For many, this was a big thing, especially in Asia, where special meaning is attached to such things. To paraphrase the Vice President, it was a big freaking deal.

Next week, next Friday, comes another. That's the day the world is supposed to end. Not, it isn't because of the winter solstice (though that is a more commonly agreed-on date). No, as you probably heard, next Friday is when the ancient Mayan calendar (which hasn't been used since the time when there actually were Mayans living to use it; I think that's approximately 500 years ago) runs out of time. Roland Emmerich made that disaster movie "2012" to describe what would happen when the Mayan calendar expired. Mass death, mass disaster, mass panic; lions and tigers and bears, oh my. I think I hear the Vice President again.

Wanna paraphrase me? Repeat this: it's no big deal. Really.

No, I'm not being snarky or cynical. It simply isn't a big deal. Nothing we do in this world really is very big compared to understanding the work of God. It just isn't. Pick a day and let's see how it compares. The day the Egyptians finished the Great Pyramid? Great and lasting stack of stones; nice, but no big deal. Columbus crossing the ocean? Sorry, nope. Detonating the first nuclear device? Big noise but compared to God no big deal. Landing on the moon? 9/11? Charlie Sheen staying sober? Again, big things but comparatively no big deal.

For awhile now, one of my favorite sayings has been "God plays chess while we play checkers." We go from square to square, occasionally setting up multiple jumps and trying to arrange a board just so, but that's usually the extent of our game; we react to someone else. Not so God. He plays chess, arranging gambits 5 moves ahead, and moving pieces on the board in a game that deliberately unfolds over time, but always for a singular purpose: to share His love. We bring Him glory by loving Him: by sharing His love, by using our talents as He wants us to, by serving others. As we live our lives, God is actively involved, even when it seems like He isn't there or is disinterested. He's at work even in the things that we think are no big deal.

He can do that because He's God and you or I aren't. We can't begin to comprehend all of Him while we live on this fallen planet. We're separated from Him by our uncleanness, and it limits our knowledge, even our intellect. I admire science that it attempts to explain things and see how a holistic world fits together, how all things are interdependent. We fool ourselves, though, if we begin to think we can explain it all, or explain all that God is. We're left looking inadequate and foolish.

We look foolish because some things are bigger than us. Like God.

It doesn't mean we shouldn't try to understand them, just that we might not be able to no matter how hard we try. We should indeed try to comprehend God, but that doesn't happen by scientific means. He's THE natural phenomena, but He is also supernatural, existing both outside and within the parameters of what we think of as nature. If we come at God to understand Him from any vantage other than love, we miss Him. Worse, we run the risk of seeing Him only through the lens of fear. Instead, we're better off to accept Him as He is: bigger than our understanding but person enough to meet us where we are, one who descended to our level because

we're incapable of ascending to His. His work is something we can't do like He does, even as we can do what He asks of us. That's a truth I can live with no matter what the calendar says.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 14 December 2012

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 6.

Remember this verse comes in a section where it talks about casting all our cares on God, trusting Him with our lives and everything even as we don't understand all of Him. Remember all that and then read it again. What do you think now?

In your life, do you cast your cares on God (or on anything other than yourself), and if you do, do you focus on it? I will confess that I struggle with this. It's difficult for me to let go, even I as I trust God and know He is always at work for my best. My wife (and kids) would tell you I used to be something of a control freak, and that's a hard habit to break. Hopefully I'm better than I used to be, but it's still a difficult habit to let go of.

Sometimes, that control tendency can manifest itself as judiciousness and a desire to be prepared. That can be healthy. Indeed, I think that all who succeed do so, in part, because of preparation. Sometimes, though, that control nature just turns into a controlling mess. You know what that looks like: failure, dissatisfaction, regret, angst, blame transfer. It would be easy to let the cares of this world take over at that point. Face it: there's never enough money, never enough time, never enough people who understand. "Never" is a word that can rule you if you let it do so in a bad way.

Maybe this is where it is good to remember yesterday's verse as well, heeding the reminder that we don't understand all of God's ways, and that this can be a good thing for us. We aren't God and we can't do all that He does. What we can do is be mindful of that, then live in each moment. We can live faithfully in knowledge of Him to make the most out of each of those moments. Sow good seed, intending that every seed will grow into a healthy, productive plant. Give our all – our faith and our hearts – to our children that they may grow up in knowing God and do the same for theirs. Invest our treasure prudently, saving and investing to earn. Wisely purchase, enforce boundaries, be generous, live fully. In everything, living in God, live fully. Never give up on God because God never gives up on us.

And never let go of that. Never let 'never' rule you in a never way; let it be a good boundary and a way God builds you up instead of a way through which the world can beat you down.

I don't know how I'm going to die. I like to think that I'm attentive to things going on in the world, because I am active in reading the news, keeping myself informed, reading stories and events in the context of God's larger picture. Face this too: we're in bad times. Things are happening that have never happened before, and it's all across the world. Evil is on the move, and if you can't see that, then I urge you to open your eyes and read up on your Word. I'm no doom-crier, and I'm not an end-times fanatic. But even I can see that the Almighty is at work, that the battle of the ages rages on and that there is more to come, much of it rough. Sometimes, I wonder how I'm going to die. It would be nice to think of dying peacefully in my own place, in a vineyard of my own planting underneath a shady tree. Or in my own bed, or my easy chair (like my dad). The thing is that I just can't see that happening. Without going all morbid, I can't see a peaceful departure from this world in my future because the things I believe are too good and strong to hold in. I have to do my part to share them; this blog is one way to do that. It's also a way evil can pit itself against you. When evil opposes you, the prince of this world has many weapons at his disposal. He'll deploy them to bring you down. When I die, I expect it to be an ugly end here, starting up a beautiful eternity elsewhere.

Along the way, the evil one will make war against you and me, never giving up on his envious hatred of all that is good. When we live faithfully in God, clinging to what God tells us enables us to stand and fight, to never give up on what really matters. When we do that, we can sow generously, work handily, and work in His fields to reap a bountiful harvest. We don't know what'll stick and what won't, so we should work our hardest as if we want all our sowing to reap a crop. It won't matter how it ends here because the ending here is a beginning to something fantastic. Forces of this world oppose that because they are agents of darkness. To quote my friend

Patrick, I'd rather be an agent of light. That's a hopeful force with which I can live. That's why we can cast our cares on Him knowing that He will bring them back, in His way, blessed. That's something to never let go of.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 19 December 2012

However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. Ecclesiastes 11, verses 7-8.

I've been away from these words for a few days now. Sunday night, my wife and I rushed up to Oklahoma to be at my mom's bedside when she was rushed to the hospital. Mom had difficulty breathing and much fluid on her lungs. We spent many hours in her hospital room, talking, waiting, and anxiously anticipating the slow release of information as regards her condition. Mom is doing much better now, and thank you so much and many blessings to the many people who have been praying for recovery.

To be honest, I had only briefly read today's verses before going up to Oklahoma to be with my mother, but in reading them today I see that, as usual, they're appropriate and fit the situation. My mom is 83 and has lived a storied life of friendships, faith, and travel. She graduated high school in 1946 and insisted on going to college in a time when most women didn't. Indeed, her stubborn Minnesota farmer father argued "I'm not paying for some damn school that's a waste of time for a woman" ended up not only paying for her degree but supporting her right to get it. In the late 1950s, after working as a scrub nurse and then a nursing educator, she wanted a change in life so she joined the Army Special Services and moved to Germany. Germany at that time was still an occupied country and still very much in ruins a dozen years after World War II ended. It didn't deter Mom, who worked for 3 years there, seeing every nation in Western Europe (and even a few in the Communist bloc) and making lifelong friends...including my dad, who she married there in 1958. They were married for thirty-nine years, and since his death 15 years ago, she has continued to travel (including a trip back to Europe and numerous trips to Minnesota, Colorado, and down to see my family in Texas), has been active in her church, and has even written four books.

It's as if the verses for today could have been written for her.

Through all these years and trials, Mom has enjoyed a full life but has also seen her share of darkness. Mom and Dad were the closest of friends as well as husband and wife. Indeed, I think their marriage was based more on that friendship than on romance. They treated each other as best friends and confidants instead of just as partners in marriage. I think now that this helped them to face the dark days that can happen during marriage. My dad's faith grew deeply during the 18 months when he was dying of cancer, and my mom's faith allowed her to cope with this without falling apart. Since his passing, her faith has grown in ways I never thought it would. I always considered my mom to be an intellectual giant in my life because, of my two educated parents, mom was the one who has always held up higher education and self-improvement on a pedestal (I think because she did it herself). Faith was important, but secondary and in its place. Consequently, while I look back and see the faith of my youth as having mainly been a Sunday morning affectation, I see now that it has become a living and vital thing in my mom's life. It is the intellect that has been put in its rightful, secondary place, and faith in God that has become more important.

It follows that, while she was recuperating in the hospital yesterday, I brought her the study Bible she takes to weekly study as well as a book on the life of Christ. She was thankful and enthusiastic for both as they will help pass recuperation time constructively. She prays regularly and repeatedly for all of us in our family, but also for friends, and for the people hurting after the massacre in Connecticut, and for other people who come across her radar as needing prayer. Especially in the years since Dad has been gone, she and I have talked deeply about matters of God, and what they all mean in our lives, about how God uses all the events in our days to mold us closer to Him. And about how God isn't indifferent or inactive in our lives, indeed about how He is always involved and at work even in ways we don't understand in the moment. I believe He was present and involved there in that hospital.

Those talks and that faith are an encouragement now, both for her as she recuperates from a brush with death and for me as I will do what I can to help her heal. It is a day of darkness when you realize that your parents may be dying. That call came, again, this past Sunday night, and my wife and I drove the three hours north to see where that call would take us. During that drive, we prayed and talked and I contemplated things I might

have to do if she were permanently incapacitated, or if she passed away. It was pitch black on the road and pitch black in my heart by the time we arrived at the hospital to find her hooked up to various monitors, oxygen, and prone in a hospital bed. When you see someone you love in a position like that, you consider the healing power of God as well as the meaninglessness of everything else around you.

Thankfully, neither incapacitation nor death have landed at her door just yet. She's still in the hospital but is better and will be released from the hospital just before Christmas. Mom isn't used to the kind of physical training and exertion that is likely ahead of her in rehabilitation, and there could be more dark days ahead as well. While this latest episode may have been brought about by an interaction of prescription drugs, it also points to the fact that, with advanced age and her physical condition, debilitation is inevitable. The day will indeed come when we get the news that she has gone. That day comes for all of us, and in it, everything else about life is meaningless except one's relationship with the Almighty. The travel, the good experiences, the lifelong education, meals, and the fun are all good to enjoy here, but they are only preparation for and a pale reflection of one's relationship with God. When the chips are down, that's all that really matters.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 20 December 2012

Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 9.

For a very long time, I wanted to be happy. I thought happiness was something you created, or that things or people or status or something made you happy. During these years, I thought it was up to someone else to control my happiness. If I wasn't happy, or if I thought I was supposed to be happy but I wasn't, I thought it was someone else's role to make me happy. It wasn't that I wanted to be unhappy, or that I didn't know how to be happy. I simply wasn't, and I misunderstood the role happiness plays in our lives and the roles others play in our happiness.

When I was a kid, we moved around quite a lot. I was born in Minnesota, which was the only home I ever knew when we left it at age 9. I couldn't conceive of being happy anywhere else. Then we moved to Iowa, lived there for a year, and moved away. I had felt happy there, but it ended. Then Pennsylvania, then Oklahoma, then back to Iowa, Indiana and I finally left home...to go into the military, where moving around is an art form. Somewhere along the open road I lost track of why happiness happens, or what makes us feel happy.

At first, when we started moving around, I made friends quickly; when we left, I lost them quickly, too. You keep up with phone calls and letters, but you lose the intimacy of close friendship. By the third move, I simply gave up trying, but I didn't give up thinking it was someone else's job to make me happy. I wasn't happy. I blamed my parents, I blamed the Army, I blamed my friends who didn't keep up, and I even blamed myself for not keeping up too. And I blamed God. Why did He allow this? After all, it wasn't my doing that we moved; why should it be my responsibility to see that I'm happy?

Funny, isn't it, how so many grown-up's think much like that child I once was. I look back now and realize I squandered many opportunities to enjoy life.

These days I see happiness as a condition. It isn't just something we do: it's a benefit of what we do, how we live, and especially what we believe. I find happiness and enjoyment in serving others; example: these words. It makes me happy to write them knowing someone, somewhere is being encouraged in some way. And it makes me happy to cook. At Christmastime, I bake quite a few cookies. In fact, after I send out this blog, I'm going to the kitchen to make gingerbread dough. It makes me happy to see people enjoying them, or to give them away so others can enjoy. I feel happy to read the Word, and to realize God is teaching me lessons that I need to know right then and there. Spending time with my family makes me happy; time with my wife and kids and our extended family. Having dinner with good friends leaves me feeling happy. A job well done makes me happy. Knowing you care makes me feel happy.

It's a condition, a by-product of something else. Happiness is a God thing. I now see happiness as what happens when the right things, when good things, occur in your life and you're content with them. If you boil away those right and good things, behind all of them is God. We can keep investigating deeper and deeper to get to the root cause of something. When we investigate our blessings deep enough, we always find that they somehow end up with God.

That's the way it's supposed to be. God made us to be happy, to be content, in His love. All that is good in this world is fruit of that love, and what we have, who we are, and how happy we are is a downstream effect of God sharing His love in our lives. When we reach the end of our lives, God does indeed judge us for how we lived our lives, for what we did with His love. When we squander it, God is just; when we share it, God is just. Scripture says that when we share His love, He multiplies it and that it always increases. When we give Him away to share with others, He always comes back in more blessings than we gave away. It's simply a natural fact of dealing with such supernatural love. And when we do that, we usually find we're happy.

At least I do. How about you?

Christmas is next week. It's only five days away. Due to circumstances – the wedding, finances, my mom's illness, work and travel – I'm finding this season to be more full of stress than most I've known. Let's just say I have a lot on my plate. Yet through it all, I'm not unhappy. I'm actually content to know I'm doing what I can, and that God is not indifferent in my life today, even with all the outside pressures. Last night, there were many things I wanted to get done, but instead of doing them, I opted to sit and watch TV with my wife. There were dishes to do, ironing to do, words to write, cookies to bake, studying to be done, filing to be finished, laundry to be folded, calls to make, reports to finish, emails to be sent, games to be played, and a myriad of other things beckoning me to act. You get the picture. Instead, I opted for an hour or so of time with my honey, time to just be together and relax and recharge together watching a Christmas movie. We watched, and shared a piece of cake, and talked a little, and looked at the Christmas tree. And I felt happy. Happiest, in fact, that I've felt in days. God was there in the moment. He was there with us, holding our hands together and joining His in them. For a very long time in my life, I wanted moments like this one. For a very long time, now, they keep happening and I'm happy when I know I'm blessed by them, and through them, and by her, and for Him.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 21 December 2012

So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless. Ecclesiastes 12, verse 10.

Words are a God-thing. They really are. Yesterday I wrote about happiness and how it's a blessing from God, a by-product of contentment in Him (and letting Him actually do what He does best in our lives). It's hard to be happy when you're anxious or worried. And worry is a sin.

All week I've been anxious. My laundry list of anxiety includes my mom in the hospital, finances, Christmas shopping, work and a project that's behind schedule, meetings at my son's school, a two-foot stack of ironing, and a host of brushfire concerns about even more minor things. The situation with my Mom has me especially anxious. I can honestly say I'm not worried, but I am frustrated and anxious because every time we seem to have a plan on what to do, it gets dashed by something unforeseen and I'm left groping around on where to go next. I'm not worried about where to go or anything that happens next, but I do feel that anxiety and frustration. Maybe this is natural when you have an older person in your life whose health is in rapid decline.

Banishing anxiety is easier said than done. To be honest, my inability to banish it from my heart is a failing of mine, maybe even a sin if I let it take control of my heart or determine my thinking. Thankfully, that hasn't happened yet, even as I'm whip-sawed by events that affect me but are outside of my control. I want to do what the verse commands: I'm simply finding it difficult to get done.

What helps is prayer. I haven't hit my knees this week, but I've talked with God a lot. I know He's at work in all that's happening, and I trust that He is doing things or allowing things that will be used for good as we go along. When I pray like this, I feel better because I've taken my burden to Him and involved Him in it, let Him take control of it (because, ya know, He was in control of it anyway). This doesn't make the problem go away – if only it would – but it makes handling it better and easier. That's the point, right?

Are youth and vigor meaningless? You bet they are. My kids are decades younger than me, yet they're affected by the things happening in our family and they have anxieties too. The families and friends of the people murdered in Connecticut last week are young and old, yet all are affected and made anxious by being caught up in this evil that happened among them. I think about when my Dad died in 1997. My oldest child was closest to him, so she was best able to grasp what had happened. My youngest child was still a toddler and didn't understand what was happening. My middle child, though, was almost 5 and she was, I think, most affected. If you talked with her about Pocka dying, she got quiet, or even walked away. It wasn't that she was indifferent or uncaring. She was simply processing the death and her anxiety about it in her own appropriate way. A few months later, out of the blue, she remarked that her Pocka had died and he was in heaven now. Youth and vigor are meaningless because anxiety, crisis, and sin affect us all equally.

In the end, all the stressors in my life are still here. My mom isn't much better and, to be honest, isn't likely to improve much in the weeks to come. Finances are constantly tight, but that's nothing new. Christmas will arrive in four days whether I've finished my shopping or not. Work will still be there whether I'm onsite or not. You get the drift. Through it all, God is still on His throne as the active Savior God of this world. He is still engaged in all that happens around us, and He is still working through these things to demonstrate His love and draw me closer to Him. THAT is the real point of it all.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, Christmas Eve 2012

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Ecclesiastes 12, verses 1-5.

Here, with these five verses, begins the end of Ecclesiastes. The 'ecclesiastor' has used eleven chapters to analyze all facets of life and declare them meaningless and void absent the involvement of God in our lives. All through these words he implores us to look at our circumstances, consider where we are and how we got there, and remember that without God it is all worthless. To end his missal, the writer asks us to remember God as we did when we were young, impressionable, learning. It is the plea of every generation.

Here, also, I'll use these verses to observe Christmas Eve, because that's what today is. It's Christmas Eve here in North Texas just as it is where you are, and it's a day to remember. Christmas is Jesus in a manger, cookies in tins, family, bright lights and wrapped packages. Christmas is decorations and decorated trees, music, shopping and crowds, hopes and anxious wishes, togetherness and much love. Without Christmas, Easter could not happen. Without Easter, Christmas has no meaning.

Above all, Christmas is a day to remember. We remember God coming to us, Immanuel, God with us. He came to us as a human, to live a life as a human so that He might die as a human divine, to return to deity, to reign as both, and speak to us through His Spirit in His Word. All of it happened with a common birth in Judean poverty under the cruel tyranny of Rome. Before the years of emptiness, trembling, failing music and fear, there was a simple start in a simple place.

I remember many Christmas memories. I was only five or six when I got a train set of my own, and my dad and I played with it for hours. Many years of late-night church, and quite a few of children's Christmas Eve services as well. Or there was Christmas Eve when I was at sea off the coast of a country that doesn't even exist anymore. A bunch of us gathered on the fantail and shared a bottle of illegal schnapps while we sang the "I'll be Home for Christmas." A cold first Christmas with my wife in Italy; one a few years later in Colorado when my dad knocked over the tree; one a few years after that in Indiana when there was so much wrapping paper on the floor that nobody could even wade through the room. Snow in Minnesota; my dad's passing 15 years ago; being tempted into sins I wish I had avoided; being together in the arms of my family that loved me. Christmas has many memories for me, good and bittersweet.

It's good, then, that I've been blessed as you have, given the privilege and opportunity to remember God when we are young so that we have Him to cling to when times get tough. A year is made of 365 days, each one full of challenges. Some of those challenges are full-bore sin and some are more quietly insidious. If we let life drag us down, then the cares of coping, adapting, dealing with, and living in a world of unspeakable sins can poison our souls. In a world like this, the bad Christmas memories sometimes feel very much at home.

Each day is full of grace, too, for every day we draw breath is a fresh chance for God to use our lives in a way to build His glory. Each day, you know, is like a Christmas gift to open. We were made to share God's love, to spread that around, to help each other, to work hard and prosper in His grace. We still waded through these days of trial, but we are victorious in them when we realize we're made to live in Him. In this world, too, those bad memories are put into context by realizing we were made for the same love that first drew breath in a Bethlehem stable. We were made to love in grace by a God who does just that. Remembering that, the good memories have a home in our hearts as well.

Tomorrow, on Christmas Day, we'll gather to open presents, share stories, probably play games, maybe watch a movie, and spend some time together on what promises to be a snowy white Christmas (a rarity for Texas). We'll gather at a table and pray to give thanks, then share an obscenely caloric and overly large meal. We'll have fun. The next day, it will be back to work for my wife; I'm off the rest of the week. My sons and daughters will also go back to work, and sometime between then and New Year's I'll probably take down the Christmas decorations that have been up since late November. This Christmas will become a memory, and one from which we'll draw good and bad just as we do from all of them. It's my prayer that you're blessed this year, that God is moving boldly in your life and that your heart is a Christmas heart. When you remember, it's my prayer that you look back in solemn fondness, but look ahead in hopeful joy.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, Christmas Day 2012

Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12, verses 6 and 7.

A very merry Christmas to you on a wonderful Christmas Day! I'm hoping these words are read and received as one of many more blessings that you enjoy on a day to celebrate the birth of real hope! Our Christmas here in Texas started about 0500 when "the Bookends" (our newly married couple) woke us in surprise to tell us that Santa had come and gone. Most of the rest of my family is now enjoying a power nap. Today will be a family day, full of togetherness, fun, games, good food, good wine and remembering why Christmas is such a blessing.

That's the good news. Read these verses for some perspective. I'm not here to rain on your parade (especially since it's pouring December rain at the moment) but Christmas is about remembering something wonderful because the future holds things that aren't. Before old age creeps up to steal our youth, before riches are lost or squandered or taken, before bitterness tries to entrench in a world accustomed to it, and before you and I are stretched out and broken, it's good to remember the happiness of Christmas because it won't last.

Remember that: as long as we're here, it won't last.

You see, Christmas is just the first act of the story of the ages. It's climax is a brutal fact: Christ was born to die. He was born to be murdered. An innocent baby Christmas boy was born for Good Friday. We observed yesterday that, without Christmas, Easter could not happen. Yet without Easter, Christmas has no meaning. It's a good thing to give to each other, but that giving has no meaning without knowing that the ultimate gift has already been given. The precious baby born in a stable was cherished and adored. Some years later, he was once more adored, this time by wise men who journeyed hundreds of miles to worship Him. He grew up, learned, matured, loved and became a grown wise man of His own. And when He began His ministry, He was cherished, worshipped, and adored again. And then those who cherished, worshipped, and adored Him turned and had him murdered. Not just murdered; savagely murdered in a painful, humiliating, soul-crushing manner that you and I simply can't fathom. Not just soul-crushed, He took on all the emotional, spiritual and physical guilt and punishment of every human who ever lived; billions of us. He who was and is God separated from God and yet He didn't. In the mystery of redemption, He was rejected, tortured and slaughtered so you and I wouldn't have to be.

And then something brilliant happened.

It happened because of Christmas, because He was born on the day we celebrate today. Look at your hands today and imagine rusty steel spikes hammered through them. That happened because Jesus was born today. Look at your family and imagine all of you deservedly standing naked and vulnerable and guilty before a just God. Then imagine being covered in snow white blood of a Savior who intermediates between you and Him. That happened because it started on Christmas Day. Look at the gifts and remember that the spirit that sprouted within you, the giving spirit of Christmas that compelled you to share with the people you love, is actually the spirit of Jesus who's joining in your celebrations today. That happened because God gave to us that first Christmas morning.

Remember these things, then remember that, even in the middle of all of what's beautiful about Christmas, Christmas happens because we need Easter even more. Remember this because, one day, the silver cord in your life will break, your gold will shatter and your wheel split. When the dust of your body returns to the dust from which it came, and when your spirit returns to God, it will all happen because of Christmas Day. It will

happen because of Christmas Day that must inevitably be fulfilled in the unspeakable carnage of Good Friday, and then the glorious, promising hope of Easter morning.

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Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 27 December 2012

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. Ecclesiastes 12, verses 8 – 10.

When I read verse 8, the one that says “meaningless,” I’m reminded of “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” Spoiler alert: after William Holden and Jack Hawkins rig the bridge for detonation, Holden is killed struggling to set off the charges. Alec Guinness, proper Brit that he is, realizes how he has aided the enemy and is mortally wounded while walking to the detonator. His dying act is to fall on the plunger and blow up the bridge. The British POW senior, having watched all this from a distance, utters “madness, madness” as the movie fades off into brilliant history.

Meaningless madness. After Christmas, after wedding week, after a contentious and busy year, all my fretting, scheming, petty, pointless sins are meaningless madness. So, my friend are yours. You and I probably don’t care to have cold water splashed on us, especially since it’s so cold outside already. Sorry about that: cold water is where we are. What good have your sins brought to you this year? Or any year for all that it matters? Sleeping with your neighbor, lying about taking that money, speeding through the intersection, taking credit for things you didn’t do, arguing with your spouse just so you can win, sneaking around when you know you could get caught: what good did it do? Same here: what good did it do?

I feel like I’m watching the destruction of the bridge, watching my friends die in the river. Meaningless madness. The Teacher, both wise Solomon and wiser God, sees it too. He’s standing there in the jungle with me, with you, with tears in His eyes because it hurts to see us suffer. His tears acknowledge the meaningless madness that is our choice to revel in sin instead of bathing in His grace.

They’re tears of understanding, too. Before it was too late, He saw we remembered Him, remembered the things He taught. Knowledge of good and evil and which one we should choose; knowledge of right and wrong and which side we should stand with. He imparted that knowledge to us and imprinted His good knowledge onto our hearts so that we could come to moments like this one and see the madness and folly in some of our bad choices. It’s not to guilt us into choosing things He wants us to choose: it’s for us to reach conclusions in our minds that confirm how He has spoken to our hearts. His tears are tears of understanding that, as we are free to choose paths that lead us through sin, we’re also able to choose better paths in which He leads that lead us into His real freedom.

That’s good to remember as we’re winding down both this busy year and observations of this book of the Bible. All our actions are meaningless if we don’t choose God instead. He’s ready to meet us where we are, in the meaningless madness of our sins, to redeem them into meaningful wisdom instead.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 30 December 2012 (Sunday Edition)

The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Ecclesiastes 12, verses 11 – 12.

We're nearing the end of this book of the Bible. God willing, tomorrow we'll finish Ecclesiastes. Yours truly will take a few days to regroup and see where I'm led in the next endeavor. I think I know where it'll go, but I'd rather take it in prayer, yet again, to God and follow where He wants it to go instead.

In the end, which is where we are, it doesn't matter. God's original words are sufficient. He doesn't need me, or you, to embellish them or add to them or even comment on them for them to be active, real, and powerful. That's one thing I get out of reading these verses today. God's words – God's Word – are enough on their own. If this blog, or these commentaries, ever steer you away from reading God's Word for yourself, please stop reading the blog. Go to the source and let Him speak to you without my intermediary meddling.

Another thing I read from the verses is that God's word should stick us while holding us together. A goad is a sharp stick that farmers use to drive oxen. The farmer will hitch his oxen to a yoke, tie that to a wagon, and then poke the oxen to get moving with a goad. I sometimes will say that people are goading me to do something, meaning they're prodding me to do something. It's like I'm tied to their yoke and they're jabbing me to do whatever it is they want me to do. That's what God's Word is supposed to do to us as well. It's supposed to jab us into action, or get us off the dime and start living our lives according to It.

Yet they're also sharp, pointed sticks that hold things together. If my life could be looked at as a building, maybe a log cabin, that I build over the course of many years, then what holds it together is supposed to be God's Word. His words are supposed to be like the nails that hold the wood together. They can be hidden or visible, long or short, but they are always strong enough for the job of holding the thing in place. With those nails, I can take the various logs, planks, boards, and sheets of wood and nail them together to make something useful, attractive, and sheltering. It can withstand many storms, and provide comfort and safety within. God's word is supposed to be like that: vital to the function of our lives whether it's hidden or on display.

Not long ago, I read a book by Billy Graham called "Nearing Home." Rev Graham is in his 90s now, suffers from Parkinson's Disease, and no longer participates in public ministry (because he physically can't). The book is written to encourage senior citizens on thoughts and things that matter to people of advanced age. I enjoyed reading it very much, so much that I gave a copy to my 83 year old mother as a gift. What impressed me most is that, even when physically impaired, God still uses Rev Graham to reach out to others as best he can, just to share the Gospel. Many years ago, I attended a Billy Graham Crusade in Washington; even then, Graham was in his 60s. Yet he was doing what he could even then, doing the best he could to share God's words using the talents God gave him at the moment. That's still happening today, just in a different way. That Word is still a vital component in Billy Graham's old age, prodding him to share in the written word when the spoken one doesn't sound as melodious as it once did. And it's still the bonding agent that holds him together, encouraging him through debilitations, widowhood, and the challenges that come as we age. If you haven't read the book, check it out. I think you'll enjoy it.

Some of these commentaries have been quite long, and some not so much. It's because I've felt moved to share them in the context of things happening in my world; memories, events, sayings. In doing that, I hope they impart meaning to you. But I've said time and again that, if you got any wisdom or good meaning out of them, it's because of God and not me. The words I write are just a tool for Him to use, a means to an end, His end. If it ever becomes an exercise in vanity for me, then I need to stop. Tomorrow, at a logical conclusion point, we'll do that together. We'll read up, rest up, then suit up and see where He leads us on the next journey.

Daily Proverbial, from Ecclesiastes, 31 December 2012

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12, verses 13 and 14.

Today is New Year's Eve, and today we finish these entries on the book of Ecclesiastes. It has taken us 8 months, together, to go through the entire book and see some ways in which God is still speaking through a three thousand year old poem. So much has happened this year that I'm not the same man I was on this date in 2011. Weddings, projects, devotions, vacations, crises, family times, friends won and friends lost, health scares, financial struggles, bonuses, that devastating Super Bowl loss, many movies, exercise pain, and cross-country odysseys: it has been a busy but very good year. Make your own list of what's happened in this trip around the sun. I bet you'll be able to say something similar.

At the conclusion of the matter, whether it be this year, this commentary or this book, God is still in, around and through it all. When we forget that, we forget to respect Him, honor Him, cherish Him just a little bit at a time. I've never experienced an event that, in itself, singularly crushes my faith in God. Yes, I know there are people who experience trauma that makes them turn their backs. I tend to believe this is actually the culmination of many questions building up over time instead of just one shock to the system. Losing our faith is like erosion: one wave at a time, the fallen world can wear away a rock-solid foundation. When that happens, when we allow it, we forget to fear God and keep His commandments.

When that happens to you, can you really, honestly, look back at a year like this one and be thankful for it? My friend, I have my doubts. I have doubts because, let's face it: whether we acknowledge Him or not, God is still there. He's in the eroding waves, and He is the tide that drives them. He's in the rock, the shore, and the water. At the end of all things, He will still be there to bring us to account on what we've made of the gifts He has given to us. It's like putting miles on a rental car: whether you did it on the highway or on the side streets, the owner is going to find out anyway. Or it's like skipping school, cheating on a test (or cheating on your spouse or your taxes), taking seconds at every meal, or name our own secret vice: they're going to be found-out someday anyway. I fail to understand how people can look back at things done in secret and not fear God.

I prefer to be thankful. Just a few years ago, I had shredded my life into tatters. Not just mine, but others around mine. My actions were the culmination of the heights of selfishness, and even though I tried to keep my deeds and my thoughts secret, they came out into the light. They always do. The path to healing from all this could only carry me to the cross, where I felt the weight of my guilt pressing my soul into dust. And at the cross, I began to feel that weight lifted off of me. The path since then hasn't been easy, but it's one in which I've always felt the warm light of hope shining down on me from that cross. It helps me to remember that God sees all, God judges all, and God wants to forgive us all. Living in that thought, at the end of it all, I prefer to be thankful.

"Have the courage to live. Anyone can die." That's a saying I saw on a tattoo. But it's true, and it, too, is contained in these last verses of Ecclesiastes. We all die; Stephen King says 'we each owe a death for a life,' and that's also true. Contained in the loving respect of God is an insatiable will to live. It takes courage to live, to fight through all that happens in a year. Whether you live in 2012 or in antiquity Judea with Solomon, it takes courage to understand the consequences of our actions and how they fit into the big picture of life. Any schlub can go through the days and expire. It takes a person of courage to live boldly. The Man from Galilee taught us that. Starting with the new year, let's you and I each have courage.

So at the end of a book whose focus seemed at first to be hopeless, I find freeing hope instead. All that we do in this world is meaningless without understanding there is real hope and solace in God. It's the promising kind of hope, not the wishing well version; it's knowing wisdom instead of unanswered questions.

The year ends in just a few hours; heck, somewhere in the world it's already over. The year to come promises to be a mountain range of new heights. There will be dark valleys, meandering trails, coursing streams to ford, and rockslides designed to block our way. There will also peaks with brilliant vistas, and there will be cleansing exercise that builds us up. At the end of it, a year from now perhaps we will stand again at the edge of a meadow, out of the mountains and on the start of a new plain. Will it be a fertile field in which to grow, or will it simply be the edge of the desert? That path remains to be walked, unwritten. Grab His hand and let's walk into it together. We aren't who we were last year, and we aren't yet who we will be a year from now, but we're better all the same. I'm thankful for that. And for you, and for all the blessings that God's wisdom imparts to us. Happy New Year, my friend, and bless your new year to come.

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