

# Old Testament Core Seminar

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## Introduction

Good morning. We've spent the last three weeks in what is called "The Wisdom Literature," or "The Poetic Books." This week will be our last week in this genre before we return to the historical development of God's plan of redemption. Next week we'll pick up where we left off about a month ago, with 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. But first, we'll look at Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, sometimes called the Song of Solomon, or Canticles.

What these books have in common, besides both being poetic and both having been written by Solomon, is that it is very easy to lose the author's train of thought in both of them. It's easy to get lost in all the twists and turns, and miss where the author is going in either book. For that reason, Ecclesiastes and the Song are often mined for pithy quotes but rarely understood as whole books. Thus the main point of the books can be lost. It's our goal today to try to understand Solomon's intent in writing, and the one point he's trying to make in each book. It's a big task, so let's pray and get started.

[PRAY]

## ECCLESIASTES

### Context

Look at **chapter 1, verse 1**, [READ] and **verse 12**. [READ] There was only one son of David to reign over all of Israel from Jerusalem. Who was that? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Right, so Solomon is our author again. And again, the date of writing is sometime in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century BC. Like the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes wasn't written in light of any one particular historical circumstance, nor is it reflective of any one particular time period. It's more of that ageless wisdom for all people everywhere. That being said however, it is interesting to point some things out about the author, some of Solomon's accomplishments in life. He united a kingdom. He expanded that kingdom's borders to sizes larger than it had ever been before. He headed a huge administration of governors, judges, chiefs, officials, officers, captains, commanders, and armies. He built a fleet of ships. He presided over many judicial matters. He established peace and trade with numerous, otherwise hostile, neighboring countries. He fortified cities with walls and gates. He brought in great economic prosperity - so much so that it was said that silver and gold were as common in Jerusalem as stone! He built the temple that his father, the great King David, only dreamed of. Then when he was done *that* he built up the rest of Jerusalem, and other entire cities simply to house his chariots and cavalry.<sup>1</sup> I point this out because Solomon is going to critique such worldly prestige, power, success, and materialism. It's a more potent critique when you know he makes the critique as an insider, from the top of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 1-11; II Chronicles 1-9.

## Theme

Like in the book of Job, Ecclesiastes first poses a problem then gives the solution to it. The question sounds like this:

*What is the meaning of life? Isn't it all fleeting, empty, pointless, and vain since we are all just racing towards death anyway?*

It's a serious question. If we're all just going to die anyway, it doesn't make any difference what we do between now and our end, which is always just a breath away. Who will remember us when we're gone? What real impact will we have made? And why should we really care who remembers us, or what impact we made, if we're just dead anyway? This is a very relevant question for us since there are entire world-view systems built around our *inability* to answer such questions. Some say there are no answers and life is in fact without meaning. Others say, it's too depressing to think there are no answers, so we have to create meaning ourselves through the things we do. Unfortunately, even this last group still recognizes that death will always get the last laugh. No matter what we do, we can't undo death. Philosophers have described the human life as a match struck in the dark. Regardless of how it burns, it's going to burn out no matter what. Then, it's back to darkness. You can imagine the countenance and perspective on life one would have if they wrestled with such questions and listened to these philosophers! Well, like I said, these are very sober questions. The answers, or lack thereof, will affect everything in one's life, from their psychological make up, to their values and ethics, to the very clothes they wear. So, I think it's imperative to listen to what Solomon has to say here, because this question is staring us all in the face. It always has been; it always will be. This is what Solomon says:

*Meaningful! Meaningful! All is meaningful because all is ordered by an eternal, sovereign, and purposeful God. Therefore, we should fear God and rejoice in what He has given us to do and to have.*

Ecclesiastes confronts man's attempt to find meaning in the creation apart from the Creator head on. The book comes to the sobering conclusion that without a sovereign Creator God, indeed all is vanity. But if the universe was created, and is now governed, by an eternal, sovereign, and purposeful God, then there is great meaning and value to life indeed. Now, notice that I did not say the universe needs a God in order to having meaning. I said that in order for the universe, and our lives in this universe, to have meaning, this God needs to have certain attributes: *eternality, sovereignty, and purposefulness*. Not just any ol' god will do. Only an *eternal, sovereign, and purposeful* God will suffice. Only if God sovereignly ordains all things that come to pass, and has the power to carry out all His plans, can anything temporal, like our lives, ever have lasting, meaningful significance. If God is not sovereign and governing all the affairs of the universe, then what is left to run the universe? Chance? Dumb luck? Blind fate? Chaos? Things would certainly be vain *then*, for such chaos has no purpose, or goal, or reason behind it. But the God of Ecclesiastes *is* a sovereign God, and so everything is filled with significance because God does nothing in vain or without reason. Therefore, God is to be feared, and all things that He gives us are to be enjoyed. After all, He has good and eternal and meaningful reasons to give them to us. This includes our jobs and homes and families and so forth. But it also includes our troubles and afflictions. These too are meaningful and good. We

may not know how that can be now. But we are called to trust God, and believe that He's not making any mistakes.

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[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

### **Outline w/ Pivotal Texts**

- I. Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 – Introductory Antithesis: All is vain.
- II. Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:23 – How all is seen to be vain: Solomon fails at finding meaning apart from a sovereign Creator.
- III. Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 – Thesis: All is meaningful if a sovereign God rules the universe.
- IV. Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 – Thesis defended: Affirmation of the sovereignty of God.
- V. Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16 – Objections to the sovereignty of God: If God is sovereign, why are there so many problems in the world?
- VI. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 – First answer to objections: Who are you, the created, to point your finger at the Creator and object to His sovereignty; you should be silent and worship in reverence instead.
- VII. Ecclesiastes 5:8-7:14 – Second answer to objections: What is good/prosperity? Those who have it don't necessarily have a blessing from God, nor do those without it necessarily have a curse from God.
- VIII. Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 – Third answer to objections: "Bad" things happen to "good" people because no one is good.
- IX. Ecclesiastes 8:1-12:14 – Conclusion: Practical application stemming from chapters 1-7.

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### **[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

#### **Theme texts**

Let's now look at how this plays out in Ecclesiastes. First off, this book is not a random collection of disassociated proverbs and homilies. Rather, it is one complete argument, made by one author, coming to one conclusion. Like I said before, understanding Solomon's train of thought, his flow of logic, is crucial to understanding the book. Therefore, we'll just go through the book, section by section.

#### **1:1-2:23**

In the opening two chapters Solomon explores what the meaning of life might be. Basically, he just looks at the bare facts of life and draws this conclusion: look at **1:2-3**. [READ] The reason he thinks all is vain is found in the next verse. Look at **verse 4**. [READ] The one thing that every generation has in common is that every generation someday dies out completely and is replaced by a whole other generation. There is nothing lasting at all about man's life. In fact, that word "vain" literally means "fleeting." All is passing away, all is evanescent, and there is no lasting permanence to anyone, nor anything they do. Look at **verse 11**. [READ] This world is full of furious living and dieing. Everything and everyone eventually dies, and,

according to verse 11, are sooner or later forgotten about. So what difference does any of it make if there is nothing to show for anything in the end anyway?

Now for the rest of chapter 1 and most of chapter 2, Solomon gives us a tour of his pursuit for relevance and meaning and of lasting value in life. He tries to find significance in wisdom, wine, laughter, riches, delicacies, his work, his projects, sex, power, fame, and full material gluttony. If he wanted it, he got it. Look at **chapter 2, verse 10**. [READ] There was nothing he denied himself. He tried every possible route to discover what could be of real profit for a man to do with his short days on earth. However, he found nothing. Look at **verse 11**. [READ] After all he had, he concluded it was all vain. It was all no more successful at providing his life with meaning and purpose and significance than chasing after, and trying to grasp, the wind. Have you ever tried to grab the wind in your hand when it blew past? Were you able to hold on to it and keep it? Well, the pursuit of meaning in the created order (apart from the Creator) is just as unsuccessful, and vain.

So where are the answers to the eternal questions? Where will meaning and value and worth and significance be found? *What is the meaning of life?* Well, no matter where Solomon looked, he kept coming back to the same conclusion: look at **verses 15-16**. [READ]

I asked you earlier to consider the psychological effect such a bleak outlook on life would have upon one's temperament. Well, look at **verse 17**. [READ] *He hated life*. With all that he had, he hated life! And look at **verse 18**. [READ] He hated life, and he hated all the things in his life! Look at **verse 20**, [READ] and **verse 23**. [READ] And who can disagree with Solomon's reasoning so far? Is not the end of everything to die and be forgotten? No wonder he hated life? Even the worldly enjoyments he had all had to come to an end at some point. Everything ends and everything dies. It's a wonder that anyone manages a smile across their face, ever!

## **2:24-26**

Now remember, the flow of thought is important. Nothing that man can do between birth and death has any lasting significance. Therefore it has no value. But now in **verses 24 through 26** he's going to lay out the solution to this apparent vanity of everything under the sun. [READ] How do we know that he's changed his tune? Well just look at some of the words in verses 24 through 26. Words like "better" and "satisfaction" and "from the hand of God" and "enjoyment" and "pleases" and "happiness." These are words on the far other end of the spectrum from "vanity," a "striving after the wind," and "profitlessness." What has suddenly changed that Solomon has now found meaning and lasting significance, something of value, in the very place where he had *just affirmed* that all is vanity? The answer is, that he has looked at the world through a new lens – new thoughts, new doctrine. In other words: *sound theology*.

Let's read **verse 24** again. [READ] Notice he says that the best thing a man can do is to eat and drink and enjoy his work. But I thought he just said that all that was vanity. Why does he now recommend work? How is it that now he says there can be, and ought to be, satisfaction and joyment in all of life? That's what "eat and drink" means. It's a metaphor to mean "everything one does," for eating and drinking are the base of all activities. So you should live life, and be happy, and actually enjoy the labor of your hands. That same vain labor mentioned above, Solomon? Can that really be what he's saying? What's the catch? Well the catch is in the rest of the verse. Solomon says, literally, that "*This too* I have seen, that it is from the hand

of God.”<sup>2</sup> Solomon has seen many things; obviously, ala chapter 2, verses 1 through 16. But there is one other thing he has seen: That “eating and drinking,” that is to say, “the living of life,” and the enjoyment of one’s work *comes from the hand of God*. Well, this changes *everything!*

Before (that is, 1:1 through 2:23) Solomon was looking at life through the lens of the natural man. And we can understand this. He was just simply reporting the things that he had seen with his eyes. And when that was the only information gathering instrument used, his conclusions were good. For who can argue with his pessimistic and sobering perspective on life and death? But, once he remembered that **there is a Creator to this creation**, life then took on a different origin, purpose, means, and end. And why is it that that which was once vain can now have meaning? Why is it that that which was once the cause of depression now brings joy? Well, it’s because the origin of every activity one undertakes is from the very hand of an eternal and meaningful God. The only way something temporal, like our lives, can ever have eternal significance is if an eternal God has so, and does so, order them, because He is a purposeful God who never does things without reason or cause. And this includes our lives; they too are from the hand of God. That means that He is in control of them; He gives them to us. And He gives us our various tasks each day.

**If this were not the case**, if an infinite and eternal God did not order and ordain the days of our lives, then fate, dumb luck, blind chance, and chaos would run the universe. Then things would be meaningless, because they would happen without any originally planned purpose. But our God never does anything in vain. He always has a purpose for what He does. He always has an *eternal* purpose for what He does. And He carries out His eternal purposeful sovereign plan without fail.

In **verse 25** we’re asked the rhetorical question to back up this claim: “For (indicating that proof for what has just been said is now coming) without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” Well, the answer is that everyone eats and many people find enjoyment without Him. Just read Psalm 73. But it is only the fleeting, vain enjoyment of the first verses of chapter 2. It’s passing, like a vapor. It will soon be gone. It has no weight; no significance – unless it is from Him; unless it is *not* “without Him.”<sup>3</sup>

Look at **verse 26** again. [READ] God *gives* wisdom, knowledge, and joy to who he pleases. But to those to whom He does not give this wisdom and knowledge and joy, they are left in the dark. They do not know Him. They live “without Him.” Therefore their days are subject to that vanity of working, gathering, and storing up wealth for someone else to inherit once they die. *That* is the vain life. It is attempting to live life in this creation apart from acknowledging the creation’s Creator. There is no meaning to this world apart from a *sovereign* God. Again, notice that I did not say that “there is no meaning in this world apart from God.” Rather, I said “there is no meaning in this world apart from a *sovereign* God.” If *He* doesn’t do something, then it’s not lasting. It’s vain. “Augustine commonly teaches that if anything is left to fortune, the world is aimlessly whirled about.”<sup>4</sup> But God *is* the author and providential Lord of all that happens. And since He does nothing in vain, nothing, therefore, is vain. *Everything*

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<sup>2</sup> The NIV has too many commas, and leaves out the key word “that.” The NASB translates it properly.

<sup>3</sup>It is, in fact, impossible to live in the created order “without Him.” Nonetheless some try. They are the ones who find no enjoyment. They find nothing lasting under the sun. They find only vanity for they do not know this God. They do not acknowledge His lordship and His sovereignty. And this is because of the explanation we find in verse 26.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, 208.

has meaning as it comes from an infinitely meaningful and glorious Creator God. Meaningful! Meaningful! All is meaningful because God has appointed it all.

If one fails to recognize that, they necessarily have to fall back on a world-and-life-view driven by Solomon's cry, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." In fact, just recently I saw a movie where one of the main characters shouted this to group of young men: "You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else... We are all part of the same compost heap." And, indeed, this movie was all about how meaningless life is. And therefore, since all was meaningless, it didn't matter how they lived. So they were involved in all kinds of immoral, and aimless, and anarchist behavior.

Well, Solomon has a different perspective on life: There is meaning and purpose to life because God has ordained all things that come to pass, and we are to therefore trust and enjoy what God has given us, and revere such a God. This common refrain appears at a number of places in the book. Look at **3:12-14**, [READ] **5:18-20**, [READ] **8:15**, [READ] and **9:7-10**. [READ]

Now this, my friends, is **the gospel-on-ramp** for our culture. People are living in the throws of this nihilism and existentialism that I've just been talking about. And in their attempts to escape the meaninglessness of life they are thrusting themselves into their jobs, and sexual exploits, and material hedonism with breakneck force. But in the end they still only come up with vanity. What's so refreshing about the gospel is that it is an answer to such frustrating pursuits and futility. In other words the application I'm trying to make is this: share the message of Ecclesiastes with your coworkers, friends, family, and acquaintances. They are *ripe* to hear it. We have a message of hope in a hopeless world.

### [TAKE QUESTIONS]

#### 12:13-14

Sadly, we don't have time to go through the rest of the book. But you can use the outline on the back of your handout to see where the book goes from there. Remember, the flow of thought through the book is important to understand any part of the book. Don't just consider any passage in isolation from its context, and what led up to it.

Let's now conclude this brief study by jumping to Solomon's final conclusion. Look at **12:13-14**. [READ] God's sovereignty is His business. He has everything under control. We may not ever figure out what He's doing or why at any given moment. (That's actually what 3:11 and 5:1-7 are about.) But what is our business is how to handle and steward what God has given us in His sovereignty. Fear God. Keep His commandments. And live uprightly in the context of everything He's given you during your few and fleeting days. That application is really one of the things that makes the Christian world-and-life view so great. It can be lived out, and it informs you how to live it out. Not like that nihilistic/existential gloom that we'd be left with if we didn't know our sovereign Creator.

### [TAKE QUESTIONS]

[The following is in a handout and can be referenced for the class to read on their own time.]

If God is sovereign over everything and everyone, are we not freed up to live a life of radical gospel commitment and to love others without restraint? If we know that God has perfect wisdom, and perfect control, and perfect command of all the affairs of His universe, are we not liberated from the fear of man, the fear of failure, and the fear of death? He holds all these things in His hand.

John Paton was a missionary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the cannibal people of the New Hebrides Islands. It was his rock-solid confidence in the sovereignty of God that strengthened him to continue in the face of great danger. Here are some excerpts from his autobiography:<sup>5</sup>

“A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done. Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each other's heels. (p. 117)”

“[Once] when natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe but a Kaserumini Chief snatched a spade with which I had been working, and dexterously defended me from instant death. Life in such circumstances led me to cling very near to the Lord Jesus; I knew not, for one brief hour, when or how attack might be made; and yet, with my trembling hand clasped in the hand once nailed on Calvary, and now swaying the scepter of the universe, calmness and peace and resignation abode in my soul. (p. 117)”

“My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth. He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the Savage of the South Seas. (p. 207)”

“Whatever trials have befallen me in my Earthly Pilgrimage, I have never had the trial of doubting that perhaps, after all, Jesus had made some mistake. No! my blessed Lord Jesus makes no mistakes! When we see all His meaning, we shall then understand, what now we can only trustfully believe that all is well - best for us, best for the cause most dear to us, best for the good of others and the glory of God. (p. 488)”

Much in these quotes is reminiscent of Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus told His disciples that He had all authority in heaven and on earth, and that *therefore* they should go into all the nations and make disciples. When you know your Commissioning Officer has all authority in heaven and earth then you can despise all the dangers of this world and even death itself.

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## **THE SONG OF SOLOMON**

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. also <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/>

## Context

Let's turn now to The Song of Solomon. The author is Solomon again. Look at **1:1**. [READ] Again, there is no strict historical context that we need to be aware of. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note again a certain characteristic about Solomon. This book is about the beauty of monogamy and premarital chastity. However, Solomon had over 1,000 wives and concubines! What can we say? The LORD inspires in mysterious ways!

Anyway, this book does have a bit of a redemptive-historical context. There is a bit of a reenactment and inversion of Genesis 2 and 3 going on in the book. What I mean is that that beautiful relationship in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve was intended for God's glory and their good. Now, this side of the fall, men and women are still to behave ethically towards each other, in proper sexual relationships. If they do, it will again attend to the glory of God and their own good. But if they don't, they will experience more of the same consequences that Adam and Eve did in Genesis 3: God will not be glorified and men and women will harm themselves.

## Theme

We can summarize the Song of Solomon like this:

*Men and women are to fulfill their roles in glorifying God together, as male and female created in God's image, through upright sexual relations in marriage.*

Being created in God's image involved being created male and female. The two sexes were to image forth God's glory through a harmonious and pure sexual relationship. Well, with the entrance of sin, it all fell apart. Now, after the fall, even with sinful natures, men and women are called to monogamy and sexual purity. This book extols the beauty and worth of living in such a relationship, and warns us not to create our own sexual agenda. That Solomon is really banking on the Genesis story comes out in the allusions he makes back to Genesis. We'll look at those allusions in just a moment.

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## Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Song of Solomon 1:1-3:5 – The Courtship
- II. Song of Solomon 3:6-5:1 – The Wedding
- III. Song of Solomon 5:2-8:14 – The Marriage

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## Theme texts

The book in many ways reads like a Shakespearian romance drama: the betrothed young woman and her beloved singing praises to each other about how fair and beautiful they each are;

then they get married and live happily ever after. Unlike Shakespeare, there is no murder and no one commits suicide.

### **1:1-3:5**

Anyway, a major theme of the book is how sexual relations ought to be. Turn to **chapter 2, verse 7**. [READ] The context to these verses is that the young woman and the young man are not married yet, and the young woman expresses her desire to remain chaste until the right time, i.e., until marriage. And she here calls other woman to the same resolve. She is saying, don't rush what you think love is and what loving acts are, until the time is right. Then, in marriage, the sex will be beautiful, honoring to God, and healthy for the relationship. Prior to that, is will only reap disaster.

These words are repeated in **chapter 3, verse 5**. [READ] This verse is actually the last words before the wedding. So right up to the very end of singlehood, chastity is extolled, and urged upon us all.

### **3:6-5:1**

Next, we come to the wedding itself in the rest of chapter 3, and chapter 4. Then the final words of the wedding are these: look at **5:1**. [READ] Some commentators believe that that last sentence there is supposed to be the very voice of God. By saying, "Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers" God is now putting His blessing upon their sexual relationship. Now that they are married, God is not only saying that sex is okay, but actually right and good and to be enjoyed to its fullest. It's not just a dirty little necessity for the production of children, but a good and beautiful and God honoring act between a married man and woman. Sex, just like marriage, was created by God for His glory and for His creatures' good and health.

### **[TAKE QUESTIONS (IF YOU DARE)]**

### **5:2-8:14**

The rest of the book, then, describes their life as a married couple. And in **8:4**, the refrain is heard again. [READ] The married woman continues to adjure young women to be wise and wait for marriage to have sex, and not make a mess of things because they couldn't wait.

### **1:16; 2:3; 5:7; 6:3; 7:10**

I mentioned earlier that the book is meant to be understood as an inversion of part of the fall into sin. Turn back to **Genesis 3:16**. [READ] When Adam and Eve fell into sin there were a number of consequences. One of them was that now their marriage relationship would be strained. No longer would it be harmonious and agreeable. Instead, the woman would desire and long for the man. However, he will take advantage of that desire and dominate her. With the introduction of sin, "to have and to hold" has turned into "to desire and to dominate." Selfishness, on both sides, will raise its head and steer both of them.

However, it doesn't have to always be so. Turn back to **The Song of Solomon, chapter 7**, and look at **verse 10**. [READ] Here we see the marriage as it ought to be. Here in verse 10, the woman is not desiring, and in turn being exploited by, the man. But the man is filling his

creation role of loving leadership and desiring, and loving, his wife. She is no longer left out in the cold, but loved, desired, and protected.

From The Song of Solomon, **we learn** that marriage and sex occupy a very high place in God's economy. Therefore, as His creatures, it's an imperative duty and a high privilege to keep the marriage bed pure: for unmarried persons to abstain from sex and married couples to love each other with it. If we abuse these gifts God has given us, disaster and frustration will be the only result, just as it was with the first sin in the garden.

Creating your own sexual agenda is like driving a car on the wrong side of the highway. Cars are good and very helpful to those who have them. But if they disrespect the car's speed and power and size and weight, and the rules of the road (that's the key, disrespecting the rules), and they use that car however they fancy in their own imagination, there is going to be a mess that is often irreversible. But if the car is driven before the face of God, in the fear of who He is, all will be safe and beautiful, honoring to God, and beneficial to everyone involved. And so it is with sex. Driving our sexual urges and throwing our bodies around "on the wrong side of the road" will result in tragedy.

## **Conclusion**

From start to finish The Song is a book about conquering sin in the marriage relationship and living to the glory of God, as man and women have always been intended to. And Ecclesiastes is also about living life to the glory of God. God is glorified when His people trust Him through thick and thin, and find joy in their lives and work for the simply known fact that God has given them their lives and their work with an eternal and sovereign purpose.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

**[PRAY]**