

Wisdom from Spruce Run

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Intro:

On seven occasions in the summer of 2023, different groupings of Spruce Run members gathered together to talk about the deep things of life. We tried to distill down our 600-some years of collective life experiences into the pages that follow.

This distillation was done by reading a few key scriptures from the biblical books of Wisdom: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, reflecting on a series of guiding questions, and finally conversing with each other honestly and generously.

These three biblical books themselves are collections of wisdom honed over hundreds of years. In presenting them, I described them to these gatherings as being like the experience of tubing down a river and like different stages of life.

Proverbs is like tubing down a river in normal times. It describes the regular course of a waterway and gives the reader a basic sense of how to navigate safely.

The book of Job is like that same river but during a flood or a drought. Look! When the water goes down, sharp branches are exposed and can pop your tube. For that matter, when there is too much water, some of these places that didn't originally seem that choppy, boy howdy, they are! That map of the river you first received, at best, is a guideline; there are creeks that are now rivers and dangers you've never thought of before.

Ecclesiastes is like reaching the ocean in that tube of yours. This ain't the river no more and that tube of yours is awful small. Look how wide the ocean is! Oh wow, what now?

Proverbs is like the first third of life, our youth. Proverbs assumes a certain lack of life experience; it tends to start at the beginning. It must provide categories of wisdom and morality—this is wise, and this is foolish, this is right, and this is wrong. Using those categories, it lays out basic rules to help a youngster survive and succeed. At base, it states, “do this, don't do that.”

The book of Job is like the second third of life, adulthood. You've now lived long enough to notice the gaps in those categories of childhood, people, places, and things that don't fit neatly into your younger framework. There are atypical situations you just run into, the unexpected, and extremes of all sorts. Situational ethics come into play once black and white become gray.

Ecclesiastes is the last third of life, being the wise elder. You've now lived long enough to see at least hints of patterns to the unexpected and extremes. You've been around long enough to see universal rules shift for society; what once was the exception is now the rule, and what once was the rule is now taboo. You are also more aware of your mortality, and it makes you reflective. You become more concerned about what you'll pass on to the next generation.

What follows is a rendition of our reflections. May they offer wisdom and contain at least some insight.

Pastor Chris Halverson

Proverbs:

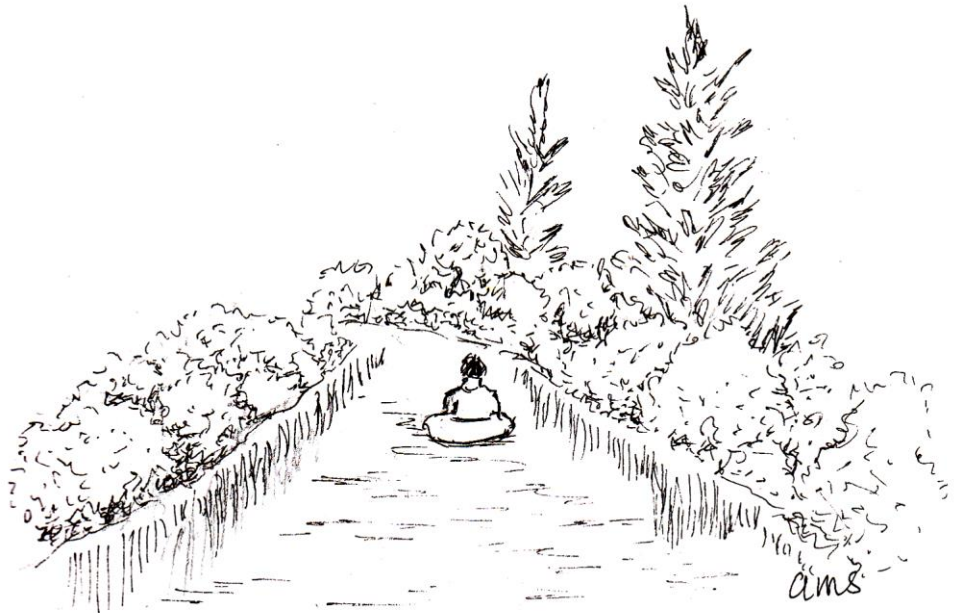
Ah, the experience of tubing down a river on any given day. There is a regular flow to the waterway; safely navigating the waters is not only possible but expected.

Our youth is a time where we are, if not blank slates, at least in need of much instruction. We need categories to help us discern what is moral and what is wise. We need a sense of what paths to take and rules to increase the likelihood of our survival and success.

Proverbs sets itself up as a conversation between a parent and child.¹ Advice and admonition offered up to a cared for young person.

There are, my child, two ways to go, a way that leads to destruction and a way that leads to success. The destructive road is filled with fools and wicked people; the successful road is trodden by the wise and the righteous. Two of the most common roads that lead to ruin are practicing violence or being unfaithful to the one who you love.²

These ways of living life are something that, perhaps with enough time, a person could observe and learn from. Just as there are scientific laws, there are also moral ones. If we simply observe the world, and its creatures, we will surely find the wisdom that is already imbedded in it.³



¹ For example, Proverbs 1:8-19, 23:19-28.

² For example, Proverbs 15:1-9 and 28:1-12.

³ Proverbs 3:19-20 and 6:6-11.

Success

“He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, whether an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.”

-Bessie Anderson Stanley

There are four things that make for health, five that maintain it:

- Eat well.
- Keep moving so that you do not lose your strength.
- Stress less by praying more. Are we not asking God, who is our Holy Parent?
- Also stress less by meditating upon those goods that we have received.
- Finally, love! Love, for it is Christ’s only command; love God, neighbor, and yes, self as well!

There are voices that say to the young, “College is the only way to succeed.” It is not so, both trade schools and college degrees are important. There is more than one path to take after high school that leads to success. Find your passion. Find what moves you, then set up a plan.

Have you not heard the saying, “I’ve only known two millionaires in my life, one was an attorney, the other was his plumber.”

There are voices, too, coming from social media that target young women, as well as men, that say, “appearance alone matters” and “Success is skin deep and surface level.” Truly, this is foolish, it is like buying a mansion and eating on a card table.

No matter the path you take, take time to master skills. Become genuinely good at something, and if time and talent allow, many things. Pursue art for art’s sake and cultivate your talents for the love of them! Become proficient at first aid, make a few favorite meals well; hone your craft!

And when you see someone progressing at something, celebrate it! It is good for their self-esteem.

Not only that, but by becoming proficient at many things, they are planting seeds in a garden—much fruit can come from it. They are investing in their future self.

Truly, to struggle and to learn and to keep on until you can do—that is wisdom.

What, then, does acting wisely look like? What brings success?

It is both acting and reflecting, human being and human doing. Cultivating hindsight is wise. Take time to ask yourself how you feel after different experiences.

What are the highlights when you look back over the last week or last month?

What are the memories that give you joy?

What experiences seem to fade in importance as time passes?

In doing this, you can learn to act in ways that bring you joy.

Act in ways that you will be proud of when you look back in a year's time or ten. When you are 107 years old, and you look back on your life, you want to feel good about the positive things you have done in life. Success is looking back on your life and feeling good about how you lived it.

After the "growing-up" stage, work on finding out "who you are" and your place in God's creation. Do this from the heart, not from the head; determine what is right, and follow that way of life to the best of your ability.

Success based on other people's opinions is dangerous and, in fact, is not success. Don't allow anyone to talk you into doing something you don't want to do. If they won't accept your decision, they don't care about you very much.

That is not to say relationships are unimportant... no! Guard your relationships, hold them close. After all, money doesn't visit you in the nursing home.

External things will never be enough to fill the inside of our souls. Seek contentment, not "keeping up with the Joneses," not looking to gain material things. Truly, that is the wise path.

Morality

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

-Maya Angelou

There are rarely bad or good people. In fact, most people want to do good for the world. There are bad and good behaviors.

There is a danger to thinking you are good, then you bless your actions as such, even when they are not.

You begin to miss your lapses in judgment, or write them off, because you assume you are a good person, thus your actions are good.

Likewise, when folks believe themselves to be bad, they think of themselves as incapable or incompetent. Then, when an opportunity to do good arises, they miss it or don't even try. They are sabotaged by that label.

Success is having a moral compass.

How you treat someone less fortunate than yourself says a whole lot about who you are; the way we treat each other speaks to who we are.

In any sporting event, the sportsmanship trophy ought to be the biggest because that is the most important thing.

Follow the Golden Rule!

Do unto others as you would like them to do to you!

Our impulse to do right, ought to be internal, part of who we are.

It also ought to be a duty, part of the social fabric of our lives, part of the social contract we agree to as people living among other people.

We contribute to a greater whole when we do our part for this world that we get to live in!

It is right to help others. The righteous do things that help others without hurting themselves.

You can't help others if your actions are self-destructive.

Just think of the instructions the stewardess gives you when flying, "Put on your own mask, before you help your neighbor with theirs."

Wicked actions are totally self-centered. They are without regard for other people.

Wicked actions ignore the costs they impose upon other people, for the wicked, the only thing that matters is that the action benefits them.

Beware of being overly harsh, seek conversation, not punishment.

Excessive strictness simply teaches a child how to lie. It instructs them on how to hide their actions.

The child will say, "I didn't learn the lesson you were trying to impart. Instead, I learned lying and deception."

Whenever a child asks the question, "Why?" Give them a valid and true reason.
Never lie to them.
Never tell them, "Because I said so!"
This only teaches them that "might makes right."

There ought to be an adult in every child's life who they can go to, no matter what!
Any struggle - open conversation will wait for them.
Not screaming or "dropping the hammer" or "laying down the law."
Only kindness and understanding.

Wise Community

Listen to your parents...

No, no, please hear me out.

As I've aged, my parents seemed to have gained more wisdom than I had thought they had when I was younger. For that matter, they've truly become *people* to me!

No longer are they just Mom and Dad.

They are people with unique and interesting experiences, who cared for me, with love, as best they knew how.

Well, okay, if you don't buy that, at least seek intergenerational relationships! Learn from people of all ages.

Ask questions of the aged and pay attention to the young.

The way schools are set up, it is hard to hear voices that are not from your immediate grade level.

Break out of that trap and surround yourself with people who are outside your immediate peer group.

Listen to people younger than you—pay attention to them, that's how they'll know you care!

Listen to old folk, they'll be overjoyed to tell you stories and share with you their experiences of life.

Remember that one day you'll be an old person hoping for listening ears, just like them.

The stories old folk will tell you!

You will experience first-hand that well-worn phrase, "The past is a whole different country, they do things differently there."

They may tell you that, "In my day we were controlled by violence and guilt."

Instead of time outs, parents disciplined with wooden spoons and even with fists. They did this because they believed, "Young people are irrational, how else can you teach them?"

It was a struggle for the previous generation to unlearn the practice of corporal punishment.

For that matter, picky eating was met with guilt trips, "Think of the starving..."

Communists

Indians

People in Africa,

they would love that food you're turning your nose up at."

You had to clean your plate before you could leave the table.

Cod liver Oil, Garlic, and Sardines were all dispensed like medicine.

But also, in that strange land of the past, children had freedoms that are unimaginable to most people now.

You were sent outside to visit friends and were told not to return home until it was dark out.

Kids had the run of their neighborhood.

Cars would respect baseball games played in the street.

You could use most any neighbor's bathroom.

The doors were unlocked.

And more importantly, every adult knew you and cared for you!

Evenings ended, the sun setting, capturing lightning bugs in jars.

When old folks fret,

About social media: "Remember, the internet never forgets!"

And screens, and kids not going out and doing like they did.

They're really wishing you could have a safe and open neighborhood and world to explore. They miss that on your behalf.

They wish that they could give you an open world to explore and test boundaries in ways that are low-stakes and lovely!

Part of that freedom, too, involved industriousness and entrepreneurship.

They want you to know about doing odd jobs as kids. Shoveling driveways, washing a neighbor's windows, or selling bracelets to other kids.

Running into a whole variety of people in the process. Saying to them, "Pay me what you think I'm worth."

And finding out the satisfaction of self-worth!

There are limits to that too.

They wish you could discover that fine line that first jobs teach you, summed up in the phrase, "Work hard, but not too hard."

The Church is a fine group of people with whom to seek wisdom and righteousness.

People to reflect upon scripture with and to hone moral discernment with.

They are a people who take seriously the commands of God. Who seek to restrain evil, cultivate the good, and learn to be in awe of God, and love God too!

Be aware, however, that church people are not perfect. We are sinners seeking God, just like everyone else.

They will fall short... we will fall short... of our highest ideals.

Some people will even use religion as an excuse to behave badly.

Don't confuse bad actions or desires, hypocrisy and all that, by church people, even clergy, with God's will.

Watch out! You may run into someone who uses the faith to distract people from what really matters or hide their bad actions under the mask of Godliness.

That, too, is not God's will!

Seek wisdom!

Consider your actions and experiences.

Square them with your values - what you believe to be important.

Square them with your identity, who you are.

Make mistakes - everyone does, but not everyone learns from their mistakes.

Trial and error are good but find a Wise One!

Find someone who you trust, someone to walk with you,

someone who will be with you in your struggles and explorations,

someone who is willing to tell you when you've gotten off track, tell you straight up that you're wrong.

Finding a Wise One is an excellent thing; they are invaluable!

Even more valuable is having a whole community of Wise Ones.

Truly it is a holy thing! It is hard to be wise alone, without community or advice.

Whenever you desire to share wisdom, remember that unsolicited advice is usually received as criticism.

Instead, be an example of the wisdom that you wish to share.

Be a role model.

Ask questions and be interested in the learner's journey.

Tell stories and repeat them as needed.

Share experiences, "I did this, this was the outcome."

Be alert for the times when people are seeking answers; only then help guide them and do so as well as you can.

Hold no expectations, only compassion. Wisdom will go where She wills!

Job:

Extremes, droughts, or floods change everything along the river. Sharp dangers, once hidden, emerge and the water gets rough. That map that the guide gave you when you first decided to go tubing, there will be times it is as much a hindrance as a help. The unexpected becomes the norm.

Adulthood has quite the learning curve to it. Things aren't as black and white as they used to seem; the categories we were given in kindergarten don't always work; ethics, a sense and system about what is right and wrong, become situational.

Job asks the frightening question: What happens when Wisdom doesn't work? It asks this question by telling a tale of a righteous and wise guy, Job,⁴ for whom the wisdom system ceases to work; he suffers despite being wise.⁵

This setup launches into a furious debate between him and his friends, who are fellow wise sages. They give the traditionally wise response to human suffering, clearly, you aren't innocent.⁶ He protests that he has lived out the wisdom ideal.⁷

At this point, God enters the fray. God pointedly asks Job, "Just what do you know, little mortal?"⁸ Then the Divine's attention is turned to Job's wise friends, who God admonishes for speaking wrongly about the works of heaven.⁹

Finally, the dialogue is abandoned for the happily ever after of folklore. Job receives back all that was lost and still more.¹⁰

⁴ Job 1:1-5.

⁵ Job 1:13-22

⁶ Job 4:1-9

⁷ Job 29 & 30.

⁸ Job 38:1-11.

⁹ Job 42:7-9

¹⁰ Job 42:9-17



Job, a play in five scenes

Scene 1: A Sufferer Describes Sufferings

Job:

Suffering? Have I suffered? Oh yes, and who hasn't.

I've hurt my neck so badly I couldn't turn my head. I've had my body scarred by cancer. I've bled inside and out and had joints and bones degenerate. I've lost hearing and eyesight on account of infections. You name it, I've experienced it.

I've been homeless, and worse still, unwelcome in my own home. I've had family relations get strained, watched siblings refuse to accept that our dad was ill, and mourned each of my parent's passing. Watching someone suffer and not being able to help, it cuts to the bone.

I've been stressed, worried, had negative thoughts; I've been afraid; I've clenched fists tight in anticipation of suffering.

You could say I'm an expert at it, suffering. I've felt it sap my creativity. I've butted my head up against illness, and all that I had to show for it on the other side, was frustration and getting still sicker. The stress just eats away at your ability to cope. On good days, I'm able to take a deep breath and listen to that soft small voice of God calling in my soul. Other days, aren't as good.

Scene 2: Three Friends on What Causes Suffering

(Enter three friends, nudging Job to the side of the stage. They stare at Job for a while until it starts to get awkward.)

Eliphaz: Wow! Look at him! Life is just like that, I suppose.

Bildad: What? No, something happened. We could look back through a string of incidents and definitely find what led to this fate.

Job: My friends! It is so good to see you! You're here for me, to comfort me in my time of need. Right?

Zophar: You call this a time of need?

Job: Didn't you hear all that has happened to me? I just said I'm an expert at suffering!

Zophar: Are you sure it is all that bad?

Job: Yes. I'm in grave distress.

Eliphaz: It's like Murphy's Law says, "Anything that can go wrong does go wrong."

Job: It does feel like that.

Bildad: Murphy's law is for irresponsible people. There is always a reason something goes wrong. We make choices.

Eliphaz: Sure, we make choices, some good and some bad, but so much of the time, stuff happens that no one has any control over.

Bildad: Job, did you take vitamins, kale, quinoa—have you heard of super foods?

Job: I mean, that's not going to fix my relationship with my family... but yeah, I can promise you that I'm doing all the things that people tell you to do.

Eliphaz: That's the way it goes... I had an uncle once who never smoked, but my aunt, his wife, did. He was the one who died of lung cancer.

Bildad: No! We reap what we sew! You must have done something!

Eliphaz: We don't always get what we deserve; it's the luck of the draw.

Job: I don't understand why I am suffering!

Zophar: Quit with your "Why me?" It's undignified. There are a lot of people who have it worse.

Bildad: There are forces out there that make life worse. People who profit off of other people's pain.

Job: I'm not listening to any evil people; I'm just going along, trying to live my life the best I can, like I've always done.

Eliphaz: Didn't Einstein say something like, "Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is a sign of insanity?"

Bildad: Now you're talking my language. He had to have done something!

Zophar: It's what separates us from him, isn't it? We haven't screwed up like Job, so we're not going to deal with stiff necks or cancer or family problems.

Eliphaz: Not ending up like that? (Eliphaz points to Job) Count me in.

Bildad: No offense, Job, but maybe you should go. You're really...

Zophar: A bummer.

Eliphaz: You could be contagious.

Bildad: All that and more. You're freaking me out.

Job: My leaving won't keep you all safe, everyone suffers... And I thought you were my friends?

All three friends at once: Well... umm...

Job: I thought you were godly people!

Scene 3: Three Friends on God's Activity

Eliphaz: Leave God out of this, Job! God has nothing to do with your suffering.

Zophar: How do we know it isn't a test? God could be testing Job, seeing what his breaking point is.

Eliphaz: It isn't about God; it's about mother nature. God just set the stage, and it's up to us to live.

Bildad: Isn't God involved in our life?

Eliphaz: Yeah, but we're not puppets!

Zophar: God is warning Job! Get right with God, or things will get worse!

Job: (*shutters*) Lord have mercy!

Zophar: Don't worry. God won't give you more than you can handle.

Job: If that's the case, then why do I need God? If I've got this... I clearly don't have this! Then why does God matter? I'm just not that strong...

Zophar: Just have faith.

Job: And what does it mean if I show weakness? That I don't believe in God, that my faith isn't enough?

Bildad: Maybe there is some middle ground on that. I have the most stubborn niece, toughest little nut in the whole world. Her way or the highway since the day she was born; she could outlast her parents in pretty much every argument.

Job: So?

Bildad: I'm getting there. When she turned six she got really sick, they couldn't figure out what was wrong with her at first, hospitalization, needles, wires. And it hit me, "the Lord made her this way for a reason." I was just so glad she was stubborn, that's how she handled it so well.

Eliphaz: Yeah, bad stuff happens, and we make the best of it, but sometimes things don't end up well, like your niece. Sometimes people die!

Zophar: God sometimes needs another angel in heaven.

Eliphaz: Ew! Aren't you saying that God is the author of misery and death, then?

Zophar: It's comforting.

Eliphaz: It makes God a jerk!

Bildad: You know what I find comforting. That God is with us in our suffering. That we're not alone. God is a refuge, you know, a lighthouse. We can see some of the jagged coastlines and keep putting one foot in front of the other because we know God is with us.

Eliphaz: Wouldn't it be more comforting if God made you disappear if you're suffering that badly.

Zophar: (*suddenly*) Suffering isn't just a test, it's a warning!

Job: If so, I'm not getting the message! I've experienced tragedies, great and small... God could have communicated more clearly to me.

Eliphaz: Maybe we personalize tragedies too much. There are chains of events that cause things to happen.

Zophar: No! Job is experiencing punishment and warning for sin!

Eliphaz: Okay, but not just Job; perhaps suffering is a message from God to all of us, humanity as a whole. We've knocked something out of whack. God gave us a framework, and we punched a hole in the side. What if, instead of blaming sinners for natural disasters, we notice how we've hurt the environment? There is a delicate balance on the planet, and we ought to use our God-given abilities to make sure we don't upset that balance.

Job: (*weeping*) Please. You're my friends, can't you at least pray for me?!?

Scene 4: Prayer

Eliphaz: (*center stage*)

O God. I will not pray for you to take away Job's suffering... if I'm honest, I don't believe that kind of prayer works. But I pray that you will strengthen and guide any doctors or nurses who come along to heal him and give them wisdom. That seems more possible.

May Job experience, in his fragile moments, that we're praying for him and that he has reinforcements. Amen.

Bildad: (*center stage*)

Lord God. Guide my friend, Job. Give him strength. Make sure he knows he's not alone. We've not been doing that very well, but please let him know we're here for him. For that matter, bless everyone who has a role, relationship, or responsibility toward him, and make them faithful in all they do. Shape them to do positive things for Job, not for a paycheck alone, but as a vocation, a holy calling, becoming God in the world for a person in need.

Remind Job, always, that you are with him. Have compassion on him, literally suffer with him. In the name of Jesus Christ, who suffered with us, died with us, and experienced the suffering of this world so that we would never be separated from your love. Amen.

Zophar: (*center stage*)

I want to just flip a switch and make everything better for Job. I wish prayer worked like that. What I can pray is an echo of Bildad, make all those who care for Job, even we friends, who have fallen short, into your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

Scene 5: Care of the Suffering People

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar:

You say that you're an expert on suffering and that, aside from our prayers, we have not cared for you rightly. Teach us, wise one!

Job:

Where to begin? Don't ask, "How are you?" Don't constantly bring up or rehash my situation; I know very well the ins and outs of it all.

I know it is hard to find the right words to say, and you desperately want to take my pain away, and negative emotions can be unsettling. But just sit with it. Weep with those who mourn.

Listen; don't try to fix things, or minimize or invalidate my experience, or offer advice; just listen!

When suffering, try to hear others' intentions rather than their actual words. God certainly doesn't need another angel, but offering hope of heaven is an attempt at kindness. If you have expectations for friends, name them; ask for help!

I've seen a neighborhood rally when a lady got cancer. Some brought food—a veritable casserole brigade—others drove her to chemo. Still others came over and just talked with her. It might sound insignificant, but it let her forget about things for a moment and feel normal.

Another time, I talked with a survivor of the Second World War. She had dragged herself through, from bombed-out village to bombed-out village, and by the end, she wondered if she'd lost her faith somewhere along the way. She found a priest in a burned-out barn and confessed, "In the chaos, I could not keep the sacraments. Am I too far gone?" To which the priest replied, "You have kept them in your heart. God knows you did what you could. That has to be enough."

I'm so glad she met that priest, not some judgy guy.

Ecclesiastes:

We've reached the end! Wow, look at where we've been, and where we've ended up. No more river, only ocean! Our tube is feeling pretty small... everything feels pretty small out here.

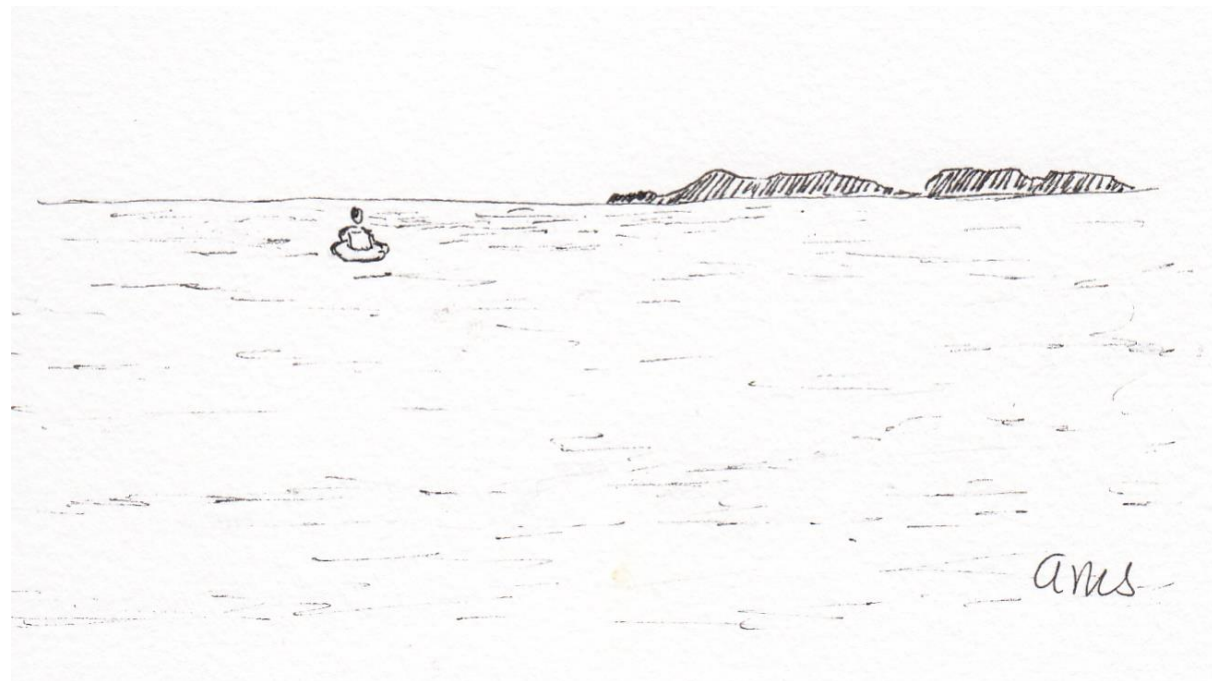
If you are so blessed, you will have grown in experience and lived long enough that you become a Wise Elder. You've seen a thing or two, maybe even three or four.

There are, it seems to you, patterns even in the chaotic times. While society, by and large, doesn't know it, all that is old is new again; trends that seem edgy and completely new now were uninteresting and every day back when you were young.

You are also aware that this *is* the last third of life, and it causes you to be more thoughtful. You wonder, what will you pass on to the next generation?

Job asked, "What happens when Wisdom doesn't work; when rewards and punishments aren't dealt out fairly?" Ecclesiastes states something a little deeper and maybe a little more unsettling, "Even the rewards you can get by being wise/good aren't permanent."

The author of Ecclesiastes, *Qoheleth* in Hebrew, traditionally translated "The Preacher," notes that the danger with effort and wisdom and the doing of great deeds is that the next generation may simply screw it all up.¹¹ He touches on situational ethics, "There is a time for everything"¹² affirms that death comes to everyone, wise and foolish and everything in between,¹³ and uses a myriad of metaphors to describe the human body going through the indignity of aging.¹⁴



¹¹ Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

¹² Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

¹³ Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Everything is Vanity

Everything is vanity.

But what does that mean?

Is everything ultimately vapid?

Is it the aging movie star staring into the mirror, jealousy in her eyes?

Is it a grasping, a yearning, for something more that will never come? Ultimately, meaningless?

Is it an acknowledgement that there is something more in life, but indescribable, unreachable.

Is it an unrealized yearning for life after death?

Everything is vanity.

But what does that mean?

Is everything vapor?

Can't that be freeing?

A puff of smoke, all those things that we feel obliged to hold onto, evaporating.

It washes away all those things we cling to as essential;

those judgments and rules that run your life?

Everything is vanity.

There must be something more.

It is so dismal, this saying. If you're feeling good, just read Ecclesiastes.

It is the dinner guest who just sucks the air right out of the room.

The truth teller who says, "Hey, you're a cog in the circuit, easily replicable."

A moral judgement about so much of our life.

Everything is vanity.

Some of us want so bad to get an A+ at life; at every last little task.

For a type A who never feels like they've done enough;

it tells me that I did what I did, not everything is under my control.

Most of scripture feeds you; Ecclesiastes is like a bath.

Just wash it all away, let it disappear like morning mist.

What shall be shall be.

Everything is vanity.

Fleeting, feral, frivolous. Ineffable. All things impermanent; limited. Mist burnt off, and smoke blown away. Temporary. Ungraspable, useless, uncontrollable. Vapor and vapid—vanity.

Sometimes it is this... sometimes it is that...

“Proverbs was so black and white, but Ecclesiastes just isn’t. Sometimes it’s this and sometimes it’s that. I can’t give you an answer, you just have to become a wise elder... it comes with time.”
—Reflections of one participant after reading Ecclesiastes

Advice is tricky; discerning wisdom is for the wise.

After I graduated, the advice I got was, “Don’t take chances.” Thinking back, I wonder, “Gee, if I’d taken this or that opportunity at 25, I wonder what it could have turned into. Later on in life, you can’t as easily take chances, there are a variety of obligations.”

I stayed in one place, in one career, for 20 years. It is still an adventure.

So often, we’re told that we can do anything we want to do in life. That’s not a realistic goal. There are limitations to what each person can do. And that’s okay.

I was preparing for a job interview. People in the know told me to change myself and present myself in a certain way, instead of being who I am. I tried to be the person I was told the company wanted. I didn’t get the job.

At the next job interview I had, I was clear about who I was. I got the job.

Be who you are from the start; authenticity is admirable.

The common wisdom was to give presents for special occasions, like Christmas and birthdays. I always found Christmas shopping very stressful. I also didn’t want to receive more “stuff.” We no longer exchange gifts but give to charities instead, which I like much better.

“Ecclesiastes was a minimalist, wasn’t he?”

When I cleaned out my father’s house, there were so many photos, and I wondered if he would have been better served by being in the moment instead of snapping so many pictures.

Similarly, I used to collect shot glasses as mementos from my travels. But then people started bringing home shot glasses from their vacations. The shot glasses were to remind me of where I went on trips; what do I do with all these mementos from other people’s trips?

Be careful when accumulating stuff; later on, it will be hard to get rid of, and no one wants it.

Can I still survive without this thing? Yes? Well, I certainly don’t need more stuff!

Instead of going out and buying new things, taking the time to fix what is broken.

I have just what I need, nothing more.

I no longer worry about other people’s opinions.

I no longer worry about competing with other people.

I don’t worry about new clothing or styles.

I don’t worry about following the crowd.

Don't get caught up in the pursuit of earthly things like wealth and power since they don't mean anything. Focus on things that nourish you physically and emotionally. This should include helping other people and doing fulfilling activities. Health is your greatest wealth.

We age differently

For example,
I once knew an 85-year-old who complained about everything.
He was miserable all the time.
I looked at him and said, "if that's how you age, I don't want to be that."

For example,
I once knew an 88-year-old who was funny until the day she died.
She was a hoot! She had such a sense of humor and enjoyed life to the fullest.
She did everything, played all kinds of games, and was known to cheat at cards.

For example,
I knew a woman with Macular Degeneration.
She was legally blind, diabetic, and just had lots wrong with her.
But she had no complaints.

For example,
There was a man who, at 28 years old, was told by a doctor that his health was okay if he were a man of 95.
Now at 78, the doctor says that his health is comparable to that of an 18-year-old.

For example,
At a funeral, I learned about an 89-year-old who took up snorkeling at 83.
Up until the last four weeks of their life, they drank, were on a bowling league, volunteered at a food pantry.
What a life! They loved life! They stayed engaged and active. Awesome!
They were happy and fine up until the end.

It makes me think,
It doesn't have to be like that first one.
There is a 180-degree difference between the joyous and miserable.
Some of it has to be attitudinal.
Some of it is mental, a presence of mind, being sharp as a tack. Staying alert and in the moment.
Maybe that's the key, not complaining, always smiling, always happy! A positive attitude makes life in general easier.
Maybe time is only a measurement that counts the number of sunrises and how many times the earth circles the sun. I believe the way you age is directly proportional to the way you live your life, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Aging: Youth's Folly and Elder Disappointments

Being Young

It stinks being young, everything is new and confusing. Everything seems like a big crisis. For that matter, social media plays up every crisis, throwing fuel on the fire.

When a young person comes to me worried about something that feels like the biggest thing ever, I feel like responding, "Hahahah, just wait!" I don't say that to be cruel, but because with age comes experience.

Despite it all, the wisdom of age is good. When a crisis arises, I've been through something similar, and I know how to navigate the situation. When you're older, not everything seems so dire; you are better at handling things. It's like what Ecclesiastes says, "There is nothing new under the sun."

For that matter, when you're younger you worry about what other people are going to think and say... as you get older, you don't care as much. You are less worried about what other people think.

It's got to be hard, being so tied into social media. It harms young people's self-esteem, is a venue for bullying, and is harming their posture.

It also is a cesspool of misinformation. I hope young people remember to never get their news from only one source and learn to be comfortable with having more questions than answers.

Being Old

What's that old saying, being old is rough, don't do it... but it beats the alternative.

Get old, but don't get old and obese.

A billion stupid choices accumulating over the years, ending up in the morass—the mess of it all—that's old age.

I have a better idea of who I am and what is important. I find my stamina has declined so I need to be careful that I don't over-do things, and I choose my activities wisely. Despite that, it is the best time of my life.

My values haven't changed much over the years.

Disappointments

My mother lost her eyesight. Her eyes got worse over time. First, things were shadowy, then lost color, and eventually, she could not see the features of her grandkids. I would describe everything to my mother so she could picture it in her mind. Once, I did an experiment. I tried to go without sight for a day. It was rough, I only lasted three hours.

Chronic illness and joint pain stink.

I remember ordering a great toy from a catalog. I waited for it to come by mail, and when I finally got it, it wasn't so great.

I wish I was told about the benefits of living a healthy lifestyle earlier in my life. The benefits of living this way have been known for many, many years.

No Longer Meaningful

There was a time when eating traditional holiday foods was incredibly important to me. It just isn't anymore.

Large family gatherings were meaningful to me when I was younger. But now that all of the previous generation has passed, the next generation has not continued the tradition. So, it's importance has faded.

Secular Christmas feels like a manipulation through advertising and the media. If I had young children now, I would present Christmas like this: "On Christmas Day, we celebrate God's gift to us of his Son, Jesus. This is the greatest gift we could ever receive. We do not need to receive any material things on Christmas for we have all material things we need. At Christmastime, to celebrate what God has given us, we give special gifts to help people in need. When we do this, the warmth we feel inside is the best gift we could receive."

Helping people makes me feel good inside, it still is meaningful. Not so going after wealth and power; the highs are very brief and fleeting, and then insecurity and desire for more takes over.

Continued Pleasures

Life is so busy; a simple pleasure is to just sit and read a book outside. Or to cook or take the time to create art. There is much pleasure in keeping things simple, being undistracted.

I love nothing more than a one-on-one conversation, face-to-face. Making the effort to truly see someone and take the time to talk to them. If it escalates to an ice cream cone and conversation, that's the best!

Visiting with friends is such a blessing. So is playing together, making up games, and being creative. Like being a kid again. Playing stickball or having snow days. There is nothing better than a snow day; it is a communal day good for nothing. A whole community out playing in the snow. That's a good day!

There are few things better than a good bonfire. Hitting golf balls into the woods. A cigar, a beer, maybe a cognac to end the night. The only thing better is harvesting; gathering all that food you grew yourself is... satisfying!

I am overjoyed to be living here in this neighborhood. Going over that one lane bridge and through a one lane tunnel and coming out the other side. It doesn't get old. Every time I think to myself, "Oh my God! I live here!" Here where we are able to see all those stars at night and sunsets that look like they were painted with watercolor. Going in any direction there are beautiful drives, and sometimes you even get to see a covered bridge!

What lasts? What you do for others; helping people. Leaving a legacy!

Yoga and meditation are so meaningful to me.

Living a simple, healthy life - feeling good - being calm - no brain fog. Thinking positive thoughts. Being grateful for what you have.

The quest for health is ultimately satisfying. Good health promotes good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. "Your health is your greatest wealth."

The greatest pleasure in life is coming to understand more of who you are and your place as a human in God's creation.

Duty and Joy

Everything is vanity.

Ecclesiastes doesn't answer the most fundamental of questions, how do you make the most out of your life, given that it is short and will end in death.

Doesn't it?

"Eat with joy and drink wine with a merry heart. God has long approved that which you do."

Everything is vanity.

But all these things that I do for myself aren't the source of true happiness.

Make the most out of it. Be here now. Enjoy life. Be happy.

Everything is vanity.

But isn't duty and generosity the true source of human happiness? The more you give the happier you are.

Be like those folks who were happy even without eyesight or who volunteered at 86.

Everything is vanity.

When you do something for someone else, then you feel better. Duty is gratifying.

Know that it'll end, enjoy while you are here.

Everything is duty and delight?

Conclusion:

I hope this booklet gives you a new window into the Wisdom books of the Bible. I hope our reflections aid you in your life, no matter which third of it you are in, no matter where you are as you float on down the river of life.

Pastor Chris Halverson
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