

Preface to Solomon's "The Preacher" 1524

Now this book ought really to have a title [to indicate] that it was written against the free will. For the entire book tends to show that the counsels, plans, and undertakings of men are all in vain and fruitless, and that they always have a different outcome from that which we will and purpose. Thus Solomon would teach us to wait in confident trust and to let God alone do everything, above and against and without our knowledge and counsel. Therefore you must not understand this book to be reviling God's creatures when it says, "All is vanity and a striving after wind." For God's creatures are all good, Genesis 1[:31] and II Timothy 4[I Tim. 4:4]; and this book itself says that a man shall be happy with his wife and enjoy life, etc. [Eccles. 9:9]. It teaches, rather, that the plans and undertakings of men in their dealings with the creatures all go wrong and are in vain, if one is not satisfied with what is presently at hand but wants to be their master and ruler for the future. That's how it always goes—backward—so that a man has had nothing but wasted toil and anxiety; things turn out anyway as God wills and purposes, not as we will and purpose.

To put it briefly, Christ says in Matthew 6[:34], "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own anxiety; it is enough that every day has its own evil." This saying is really the interpretation and content of this book. Anxiety about us is God's affair; our anxiety goes wrong anyhow, and produces nothing but wasted toil. (Luther's Works, vol. 35, p. 264)

THE ECCLESIASTES OF SOLOMON, WITH ANNOTATIONS BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER

THIS book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered....

The summary and aim of this book, then, is as follows: Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future and are, as Paul says, without care and anxiety (Phil. 4:6). It is useless to plague oneself with anxiety about the future. By a sort of continuing induction from particulars, Solomon concludes that the efforts and endeavors of men are vain and useless, so that he draws a universal conclusion from particulars and shows that the efforts of all men are vain. He denies (9:11) that bread is to the wise or the race to the swift or the battle to the strong. In fact, the wiser or holier or busier someone claims to be, the less he accomplishes, and his wisdom, his righteousness, and his work are useless. And so if none of these things nor anything else amounts to anything, it follows that everything is vain and useless.

But here at the very beginning it is necessary to eradicate the error and dangerous opinion held by many, that the author is speaking about a contempt for creatures, which Scripture by no means wants to be despised or condemned. For all things that God has made are very good and have been made for the use of man, as Paul says in very clear words in 1 Tim. 4:4-5: "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer." Therefore it is foolish and wicked when many preachers inveigh against glory, power, social position, wealth, gold, fame, beauty, or women, thus openly condemning a creation of God. Government, or power, is a divine ordinance. Gold is good, and riches are conferred by God. A woman is a good thing, made to be a helper for man (cf. Gen. 2:18). For God has made all things to be good and to be useful for some human purpose.

What is being condemned in this book, therefore, is not the creatures but the depraved affection and desire of us men, who are not content with the creatures of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honors, glory, and fame, as though we were going to live here forever; and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present and continually yearn for other things, and then still others. For this is the height of vanity and misery, to cheat oneself of the use of present goods and vainly to be troubled about future ones. Such depraved affection and human striving, I say, is what Solomon is condemning in this book, not the creatures themselves. For about the attitude toward creatures he himself says below (5:18) that there is nothing better for any man than to find enjoyment and make life pleasant for himself, to eat and drink and enjoy his toil, etc. He would be contradicting himself completely if he were to condemn these things themselves rather than the abuse of these things, which comes solely from the affections. (Luther's Works, vol. 15, p. 7-8)

...Thus the subject or matter of this book is simply the human race, which is so foolish that it seeks and strives for many things by its efforts which it cannot attain or which, even if it does attain them, it does not enjoy but possesses to its sorrow and harm, as the fault not of the things themselves but of its own foolish affections. Julius Caesar was occupied with the effort to achieve the imperial power. How much danger and how much labor did this cost him? And when he had achieved it, he still was not satisfied. He still did not have what he wanted, but in the strenuous attempt to gain more he perished miserably. This is what happens in all human efforts. When things come flowing in, boredom soon takes over; if they do not flow in, there is an insatiable desire to have them, and there is no peace. This vice of the human spirit was seen by pagan writers. Thus Ovid says: "Whatever is permissible is unpleasant, but what is not permissible inflames us more violently. I run away from what follows me, and I follow what runs away from me." Again: "No one lives content with his lot, and no one has learned to remain within his destiny." This is the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible; it continually looks for others, and then still others, and is not satisfied until it achieves what it wishes, whereupon it despises what it has achieved and looks for something else.

To reiterate, the point and purpose of this book is to instruct us, so that with thanksgiving we may use the things that are present and the creatures of God that are generously given to us and conferred upon us by the blessing of God. This we are to do without anxiety about the things that are still in the future. The important thing is that we have a tranquil and quiet heart and a mind filled with joy, that is, that we be content with the Word and work of God. Thus in the verses that follow he exhorts us (9:7-9) to eat and drink and enjoy life with the wife of our youth; oil should not be lacking on our head, and our garments should always be white. This is in accord with the saying of Christ (Matt. 6:34): "The day's own trouble is sufficient for the day"; and Paul says (Rom. 13:14): "Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." If a man were to follow this, he would have a peaceful and tranquil heart, and God would abundantly supply everything. But now a man tortures himself with a twofold evil, depriving himself of the use of things that are present and uselessly troubling himself with anxiety about things that are in the future; or if some use is made of things, it is only in bitterness. Cicero was a man of such eloquence that he could have been completely happy if he had known how to use his tranquility. But that good man always wanted something bigger and vainly pressed his plans, and see how many good things he robbed himself of and what calamity and ruin he brought down upon himself! Therefore St. Augustine says aptly: "Thou hast commanded, Lord, that a man who is not content with what he has receive a restless heart as a punishment."