



The Book of Ecclesiastes

*(The search for the ultimate maxim
to explain the nature of life).*



Chapter 8

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The book of Ecclesiastes occupies a unique position in the Bible due to its prevalent sense of pessimism and absence of God's intervention in our world. In fact, the all-prevailing mood of a God remote from our human condition sets the tone for Ecclesiastes which seems incongruent with the other books of the Old Testament. It contains reflections, more philosophical in nature, rather than a testimony of belief, which we would normally associate with the Hebrew scriptural tradition. For the traditional author, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, God is the inscrutable originator of the world who determines the fate of humankind. Just as the natural is in constant movement minus the presence of real change, so the human expenditure of energy comes to nought, despite the fact that reason leaves us baffled, the author affirms that life is worth living with all its limitations. The following metaphrase (literal) interpretation, on the chapters of the Book of Ecclesiastes, are by Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus, an early Father of the Church.

Chapter 8

Moreover, wisdom, when it is found in a man, shows itself also in its possessor's face, and makes his countenance to shine; as, on the other hand, effrontery convicts the man in whom it has taken up its abode, so soon as he is seen, as one worthy of hatred. And it is on every account right to give careful heed to the words of the king, and by all manner of means to avoid an oath, especially one taken in the name of God. It may be fit at the same time to notice an evil word, but then it is necessary to guard against any blasphemy against God. For it will not be possible to find fault with Him when He inflicts any penalty, nor to gainsay the decrees of the Only Lord and King. But it will be better and more profitable for a man to abide by the holy commandments, and to keep himself apart from the words of the wicked. For the wise man knows and discerns beforehand the judgment, which shall come at the right time, and sees that it shall be just. For all things in the life of men await the retribution from above; but the wicked man does not seem to know verily that as there is a mighty providence over him, nothing in the future shall be hid.

He knows not indeed the things which shall be; for no man shall be able to announce any one of them to him duly: for no one shall be found so strong as to be able to prevent the angel who spoils him of his life; neither shall any means be devised for cancelling in any way the appointed time of death. But even as the man who is captured in the midst of the battle can only see flight cut off on every side, so all the impiety of man perishes utterly together. And I am astonished, as often as I contemplate what and how great things men have studied to do for the hurt of their neighbours. But this I know, that the impious are snatched prematurely from this life, and put out of the way because they have given themselves to vanity. For whereas the providential judgment of God does not overtake all speedily, by reason of His great long-suffering, and the wicked is not punished immediately on the commission of his offenses,— for this reason he thinks that he may sin the more, as though he were to get off with impunity, not understanding that the transgressor shall not escape the knowledge of God even after a long interval. This, moreover, is the chief good, to reverence God; for if once the impious man fall away from Him, he shall not be suffered long to misuse his own folly. But a most vicious and false opinion often prevails among men concerning both the righteous and the unrighteous. For they form a judgment contrary to truth regarding each of them; and the man who is really righteous does not get the credit of being so, while, on the other hand, the impious man is deemed prudent and upright. And this I judge to be among the most grievous of errors. Once, indeed, I thought that the chief good consisted in eating and drinking, and that he was most highly favoured of God who should enjoy these things to the utmost in his life; and I fancied that this kind of enjoyment was the only comfort in life. And, accordingly, I gave heed to nothing but to this conceit, so that neither by night nor by day did I withdraw myself from all those things which have ever been discovered to minister luxurious delights to men. And this much I learned thereby, that the man who mingles in these things shall by no means be able, however sorely he may labour with them, to find the real good.