

The Science of Solomon

An interpretation of Ecclesiastes

by Lynn Andrew

Every person is born a scientist. Science, the study of things as they appear to us using our natural abilities and whatever extensions of them we can utilize, is the first thing we do.

The aim of science is to explore the natural world insofar as we are able. Curiosity is the motive—in a personal way: what makes one person wonder is not the same as another's curiosity. But all of us share a desire to discover what we are capable of in order to explore the avenues that may be open to us.

Our scientific careers that began in infancy will continue until death if you take every little thought and action to be an experiment. If not an experiment, it is a procedure carried out with confidence in the scientific principle: the consistent result of several experiments will turn out as it did before. The child cries, relying on the law that says she will get attention from her mother by crying; the adolescent, having experienced the diminishing returns of crying, experiments with other ways of satisfying his need for attention; adulthood complains about the monotony of the laws that dictate one's pattern of life and seeks to discover additional possibilities.

There is a built-in desire to discover everything on one's own, but life is too short to cover much ground if we insist on being our

own scientists exclusively. Fortunately, the discoveries of others are available for our use, so we can start from almost any degree of advancement in any chosen direction. Nevertheless, some things are so personal that we feel we must verify them ourselves; we feel that no one's experience is quite exactly suited to us, so we conduct our own experiments in which we are doomed to discover what has already been discovered. Though it seems folly when expressed this way, such experimentation is universally accepted as normal behavior—and that only because Solomon-the-scientist is universally ignored.

God gave Solomon such an overflow of wisdom that he was able to arrange the governance of his nation and have plenty of time left over for other pursuits. This brilliant man was curious about everything; he wanted to understand the created order and what possibilities were in it for any man to enjoy. His was the finest scientific mind of all time, and the proof of it is the success it brought him as he applied himself to understanding the world. He became the world's richest man not simply by financial leverage but by diligent effort in studying and understanding everything through direct experiment and by applying the knowledge he gained. At the end of his life he distilled and set down his findings in the book we call Ecclesiastes, presenting them in the mode of a preacher, in a general way that would be applicable to anyone at any time. It is Solomon's greatest contribution to the world. The man did nothing in a small, mean way, and this book of the Bible is the crowning masterpiece of his life. Blessed is the person who receives and understands it. As J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "... if there is one Old Testament book more than another which many *Christi-*

ans of today need read and pray over, it is Ecclesiastes." ¹ Unfortunately, it is the most misunderstood and misused book in the Bible—misunderstood by the church and misused by her enemies. If this book had been put to the good use for which it was intended, it would not have been relegated to the dustbin of theology where it lies unprotected for skeptics to seize and misuse for their own purposes.

Science discovers a wondrous yet frustrating world in which there is little to satisfy the human soul. This is Solomon's conclusion. Solomon's genius is that he came to a conclusion. Every other scientist (which is all of us) keeps stubbornly looking for purpose where there is none. Fortunate is the one who will sit at the feet of the wisest man for a little while and learn from him the limitation of science, which is the limitation of everyone's own science. Ecclesiastes will not inspire you with dreams of paradise. But if we are to make the most of the few years allotted to us in this life, we do well to listen to the preaching of Solomon the scientist, for he will save us an enormous amount of time that we would spend duplicating his experiments. Take Ecclesiastes to heart, and you are left with the correct orientation to pursue God and learn what science can never discover.

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity—empty!"

"You've been saying that a lot lately, Dad."

"I've come to that conclusion, son. I know, I've said it before, but I was half jesting. If someone had told me all was vanity when I was your age, I would have been way ahead of the game. Instead, I

1 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, Vol. Three, p. 168.

spent a lifetime finding it out for myself."

"What are you writing, Dad?"

"It's the report of my findings, but I'm afraid it's going to be too long. Nobody will take time to read all of this."

"Findings about what?"

"Findings about everything! This is my life's work, son. I wholeheartedly searched out by wisdom all that is done under the sun. What I found is it's an unhappy business that God has given us."

"I know you keep notebooks, but I didn't stop to think how much it might add up to."

"You saw very little. By the time you were born I had slowed down and had begun to write."

"Do you mean you were conducting all this research before I came along? I thought you were traveling around collecting proverbs and songs."

"It was a reason to travel. When you get old you tend to be weary of everything. Collecting folklore was a little goal that gave me a little joy and kept me going."

"I came to tell you that your *Nuggets of Wisdom* has gone over big. Half the booths at the bazaar are selling copies. I'm sure people will buy anything you write."

"Not this, I'm afraid. Look at the size of it!"

"All that? Granted, it would cost six month's wages if you had to pay someone to make a copy. But why not use your slaves?"

"I still have to feed them. And I would not trust them to make

accurate copies if they were forced to do it. In some cases it pays to coerce workers. But that would be folly if it has anything to do with writing. Writing—even the copying of writing—must be done for the love of something or someone. But when you see them out in the fields laboring under the scorching sun, consider that it is an unhappy but necessary business if we are to have food in store for dry years. And don't put the blame on their boss, for he is carrying out what the official over him requires of him, and that man in turn is only doing what a higher official requires and so on until it comes to the king. Do you think I have any pleasure in this? Just a little, my son, a very little, and that is to see the storehouses full and ready to meet famines in order to keep this people alive."

"Yes, father. Speaking of accurate copies—I hate to tell you this, but most of those copies they're selling at the bazaar are not good copies. I was down there this morning, dressed like a farmer so they would not suspect me of being a spy for the king. Every seller told me his copies were the best—that they were perfectly accurate and complete. Usually what I was shown looked rather good, but I was warned by someone that what they show you and what they sell you are two different things."

"What prices are they going for?"

"I'm not sure what they're going for. What they're asking runs as high as a year's wage and as low as a month's wage."

"Did you buy a copy to show me?"

"No. I thought you might give me one."

"Do you mean to say you do not yet have one of your own?"

"I don't know when I would have time to read it, Dad. But I was thinking we should put a stop to the selling of inferior copies."

"If a book of wisdom can be gotten cheap, and someone will read it because he has paid what he can afford, it is better than no book at all."

"Some of those I saw being carried away were half the original size or less."

"That still leaves plenty of proverbs. They may have made it less repetitious."

"But I know you spent a lot of time carefully arranging them."

"That was vanity too. According to what you say the scribes are making a killing at the expense of my careful work. It doesn't surprise me. I think this new book will have to be much shorter. But look at the material I have for it! It will not be easy to condense it enough to make it acceptable to the common man."

"Then let it be for the scholars. Anything you write will be treasured."

"No, it's too important for that. If I were a preacher I'd preach a series of sermons. Then I would know that some got the message. That's what I'll do: I'll write them sermons. The research notes can wait, and I'll organize them later."

"I think that's a great idea, Dad! You could get someone to preach your proverbs too."

"No, no. I don't care about the proverbs that much. Really I have just one message that I want to get across: vanity! People spend their lives striving after wind. I want to tell them to stop that

waste!"

"You always say you cannot tell this people anything."

"That surely is true; I had almost forgotten. Preaching to them would be vanity too. I'll write something down. Vanity or not, I've got to do it. No doubt it will be ignored or misunderstood. But I've spent my life doing this research. I think it's impressive!"

"Someone else will too, Dad. But you have to make it dramatic before you will get the ear of the common man. Or how about this: make it personal!"

"That's a great idea! You're right! You've just proven you're the king's son. I'll make it personal, like an autobiography. That will sell!"

"People always want to know the intimate details of the king's life."

"Ugh! No, I can't take it down to that level whether they would like it or not. That would be repulsive to me."

"But if you want people to read it or listen to you preach it ..."

"No, it has to be on a serious plane. It's a very, very serious thing I have to say. I will spice it, though; I will tell them in no uncertain words; I will drive home the point that there is no meaning in life. None! It's all vanity apart from God. I tried it, and what did I find? First, I studied the work of God in creation. Son, there is no end to it! Man cannot find out what God has done under the sun. However much you may toil in seeking, you will not come to the end of it. Make that your life's work and you will find you were striving after wind. Even though some wise scientist claims to

know, he doesn't know because he cannot find it out. So don't waste your time trying to understand where the understanding of man cannot go. I tried it all! I checked it out, and all that sort of striving is vanity. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor can anything be taken from it. God has made the understanding of it beyond man so that people will respect him; that's the whole point of it. It's just the way the world is, like it or not. I want to shake every youth by the shoulders and tell him, 'Remember your Creator before the evil days come of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.' Fear God and keep his commandments. That, my son, is the whole duty of man. God will judge every deed and every secret thing, whether good or evil. This must be told, and it must be written. God gave me wisdom for this purpose—to write these words that the wise have nailed down, for they are like goads. They come from one Shepherd, my son. So beware of books that contradict what you hear me say. Of making many books there is no end, and much study of them wearies the flesh."

"I agree with that!"

"But you have not read *Nuggets of Wisdom*, is that not true?"

"Not yet. I have a debt to be settled, and I thought perhaps you could help me with it."

"You owe the casino again. I suppose."

"I'll pay you back. I finally have figured out their game, and I'll be able to win it all back as soon as I pay what I owe."

"Why don't you stay home and attend to your family?"

"My wives are always quarreling with one another. It's very unpleasant at home."

"Didn't I tell you one wife is all you need?"

"I know, I know. She was a snare—I had to do something or go crazy."

"I believe I told you before you married her to beware. It's the thing I find more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. I warned you because you were not living for God."

"I've always brought my sacrifice to the temple."

"Oh, my son! Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Better it is to draw near and listen than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for you must learn what constitutes evil."

"If you had only one wife, I wouldn't be here, Dad. So why must I solve the problem in another way?"

"You were to benefit from my findings, which are that he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. You will not escape this snare in any other way than by pleasing God in what you do. If many wives could give a man freedom, I would know it. But this is what I found while adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly—but I have not yet gotten to the bottom of: one worthy man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."

"You make it sound hopeless, Dad! Lighten up! Things aren't

that bad!"

"Let not your mouth lead you into sin, son, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and bring to nothing the work of your hands? Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few."

"I promise, so help me God. I will try to keep my words few from now on."

"When you vow a vow to God, do not neglect paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools, my son."

"What can I do? I am a sinner. Do you think I don't fear God and try to be righteous?"

"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who in his doing good never sins. In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. But you cannot prolong your life by being extremely wicked—or by being extremely righteous, for that matter. It is good that you should withhold your hand from pursuing either of these for the sake of personal gain. You see, if you fear God you will not fall into the trap of trying to manipulate him; that's pure vanity. Nevertheless, though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, I know that it will be well with him if he fears God, precisely because he trembles before him, no more and no less. But it will not be well with the wicked in the judgment, neither will he prolong his days like an evening shadow, for God is not in his thoughts because he

does not know that all else is vanity."

"This is a puzzle, is it not? How would you have me approach life when there is only vanity on every hand? If I try to please God by my efforts, you say it is vanity. If I go my own way and do my best to succeed, you say that is vanity too."

"I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful. This alone will sustain him in all the days of his toil on earth. Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved it. There is nothing better, for this is from the hand of God."

"Toil? I'm afraid I do not understand that word. You must know that being the king's son has its disadvantages."

"There is a season for everything. You will soon find your toil. There is a time to plant and a time to pull up what was planted. You have been pulling up, but there will come a time to plant. One man recommends gathering stones, but there is a time for casting away stones. You must know there is a time to speak and times to keep silent. I found that man cannot make rules and create a better life by following them. The world that God has made is not so simple that it can be marshaled to serve man in that way. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; he is too unstable, yet both are laid bare before God. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous

and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. But do not think that your toil when it comes makes you righteous before God; that is merely striving after wind because when you examine it closely you find that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's striving to be better than his neighbor, and this is vanity for it never leads to satisfaction. Everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power should enjoy them and not think of himself as being great, for that too is vanity."

"And if not?"

"If not, accept your lot and rejoice in your toil—this too is the gift of God, and you will not much remember the toil of your life because God gives you just enough joy in your heart for each day if you will not always be demanding more."

"Yes, wealth—how easily it flows through my hands."

"Rejoice, young man, and let your heart cheer you. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes if you must. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. When you become ambitious and dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. Go ahead as long as you realize it is God whom you must consider first. For God will bring every deed and every secret thing into judgment, whether good or evil. In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, and you will not be able to find out how long it will last or what your future holds."

"My prosperity may have ended already. I cannot go home like this, with no bread and no wine."

"Better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. In the end all mankind go that way, and the living will lay it to heart. Feasting is vanity, but something accrues to those who mourn. Sorrow is better than laughter, for a truly glad heart comes only out of sadness. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

"If I could only go back and do it over. There was a time when my burdens were few ..."

"Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is as good as an inheritance: the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that it preserves the life of him who has it. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit."

"It makes me angry when I think of those women ruling my house."

"Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools. Go home to your family, and your empty purse will find more welcome there than at the casino. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, he is no better than the stillborn child who experienced nothing."

"But how can I enjoy what I do not have?"

"Go down and tell the stable master I said to hire you for regular wages. This is the toil you have come to, my son."

"Must the king's son work among the beasts?"

"Here, listen to this from one of my notes: 'I said in my heart regarding the children of man that God is testing them in order that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to beasts is the same. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts. Beast and man are made of dust, and to dust we all return. What does it benefit a man to know that his spirit rises to heaven while the spirit of his beast sinks downward? You see, the pride of life is vanity. Again I realized there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work. Accept your lot! No one can tell you what will become of your accomplishments after you are gone.' Yes, I believe that dust returns to the earth, and spirit returns to God who gave it. Your grandfather David believed that, and so do I. God has put eternity into the heart of man, yet in vain does man try to understand it. You cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I said I will apply my wisdom to this, but to no avail: The future—only God knows it. And the past? It is deep, very deep—who can find it out?"

"What will they say?—the king's son cleaning the stable."

"All toil is vanity, my son. Cleaning up after the horses is no different from any other toil. And that is as it is meant to be. Everything under the sun is vanity. None of it will satisfy your soul. That is my conclusion that I want you to understand. Do not imagine that you could satisfy yourself by winning a million shekels at the casino. If you did, it would be a gift from the hand of God. But so are your strong arms a gift from God. He has made everything beautiful in its time."

Though Solomon had some advice to pass on, he was not a philosopher. He may have wanted to be one, but he was honest enough to admit that he needed experience on which to base a philosophy. He searched diligently and found no meaning in man or nature apart from God. So he stopped there and put up a warning sign. Solomon's warning is backed by credentials that no philosopher has come close to matching: his wisdom and experience towers above them all. Naturalistic philosophers have to either ignore or misinterpret Solomon in order to carry on their business, which is supposed to be to find meaning in man and nature. If one of them were to succeed, they would all be out of a job. But Solomon has told them that they will never succeed, and so they have nothing to worry about.

Solomon knew that all language is metaphor, and prose is but inferior poetry. He excelled as a poet as he did in everything, and Ecclesiastes is no exception. I will not degrade it by vain dissection. Science dissects and categorizes. The danger in that is creating artificial distinctions that are not truly inherent. Or failing to ask why divisions exist. Solomon stands almost alone among preachers as one who integrated what he had differentiated. In fact he never departs far (and perhaps not at all if he were perfectly understood) from keeping the whole in view. There seems to be no law against careless dissecting of Scripture and no prohibition against cutting away essential figures of speech. Indeed, attaching foreign elements to the fragments seems to be the object of the game. Does anyone care that reassembling such a conglomeration would make a grotesque parody of the whole?

Solomon left us that bowl of proverbs too—little nuts to swal-

low whole or, if you have a taste for that sort of poetry, to chew on. They are the outgrowth of one field of his research, where language itself was both the tool and the planting. In a word, Solomon's proverbs make intriguing puzzles or tasty snacks, but his next book turned out to be literally a lifesaver, for it may have saved one or two persons over the millennia from wasting precious years duplicating his experiments.

That is not all Solomon had to offer. There was more to him than head of state, scientist, sage, and wealthiest man in the world. We glimpse the romantic Solomon in his third book where he explores the depths and ironies of love. If King Solomon had lived in the first century AD, he surely would have sat at the feet of the Apostle Paul and learned from him the romance of Christ. And perhaps he would have taken up his pen again and written another poem entitled the *New Song of Songs* that might have been added, after much debate and furious dissension, to the library holy writ.

Lesser preachers love to criticize the Preacher. I refuse to do that (though I fear I have not done him justice) because I may meet him some day. The underlying problem seems to be that too little respect is given to the wisdom of the author and too much confidence is put in the wisdom of the expositor. Solomon's wisdom and literary ability are severely deprecated by too many professors; and thus encouraged, preachers take license to tear the fabric anywhere and twist the pieces to fit their own uninspired schemes. The picture we get from that effort is a schizophrenic Solomon who had become his own fool at the end of his miserable life. No problem: someone else wrote Ecclesiastes, fooling all but the wisest scholars.

Last night I had a dream in which I wanted to join a long line of a thousand people waiting for an audience with King Solomon. An angel was at the checkpoint, examining the credentials of everyone going through. You had to be qualified in some way to be there. I pulled out this essay and handed it to him.

"What's this? An essay on Ecclesiastes. Solomon the scientist, huh? Hmm. Well, Hmm. I guess it'll do. You got one thing right: Solomon wrote it. Next."

†