



Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action
in the community of Cornton

Through the Bible

Exodus
Nehemiah
2Chronicles Luke
Acts 2Timothy 2Peter
Zephaniah
Ecclesiastes
1Timothy Joshua
Psalms James
Isaiah
Titus
Daniel
Hebrews
Zechariah
1Samuel 2Corinthians
Malachi
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Job
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1Thessalonians
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Mark
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SongsofSongs
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Micah
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1John
Proverbs
Esther

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*In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.
(v.9)*

When I was a boy I thought I had it all worked out – when I grew up I was going to play football for Hibs and be the best midfielder in the land. By my teenage years I realised this was not going to happen so I turned my thoughts to university but at the same time looked at jobs. I was offered a place at university and also a job at the same time...I took the job. Working in the bank was enjoyable and soon I dreamed of better jobs and planned how I would climb the ladder. At times I had dreams and plans for my own business but always settled back on the bank being my career for life.

But God had a different course laid out for me. Through His clear leading, and in accordance with the gifts He had given me, I became a pastor. Although I had planned my course, the Lord had determined my steps. Through his leading, the voices and advice of others, and the support and encouragement of my wife I ended up in full time Christian ministry.

Most of us have had similar experiences. We think ahead and carefully work out a plan. We picture in our minds with great detail how our future is going to unfold. But things don't go as planned. Some doors close, while others open. If this happens to you, it may be that God has something completely different in mind.

It's good to plan and dream and think ahead. But we must always be open to God-appointed changes in direction. God will never mislead us. When we trust Him with all our heart, He will direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5-6). His way is always best. Let us make our plans for that is good and wise to do, but let's make sure we're open to the Lord's leading and guiding and change of direction – for he knows best.

Pray: thanking God for his leading and guiding.

Reflect: do I stick rigidly to my own dreams and plans or am I open to God's leading and guiding?

He who covers over an offence promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. (v.9)

The story is told of three pastors who went fishing together in the northern wilderness of Canada. While they were there they became quite friendly with one another and began to talk about their innermost thoughts. One confessed that he had been guilty of certain sins. He named them, then he urged the other two to confess their weaknesses. The second pastor confessed that he too, had certain weaknesses and recounted them in detail.

The third pastor remained silent for a long time. Finally when pressed by his fellow elders to reveal his weaknesses, he said, “Brethren, I don’t think you want to know my weaknesses, but since you insist, I am going to tell you. I just love to gossip and I can hardly wait to get home.”

Proverbs 17 reminds us of the dangers of listening to evil lips (v.4) and gossiping (v.9) but also of the merit in using words with restraint (v.27) and the wisdom of remaining silent at times (v.28). Words can cause so much good but they are also the cause of much damage in the world today. Words well thought through can encourage the heart of another but words ill thought can ruin a friendship, destroy a reputation, and cause a battle.

The encouragement of verse 9 is to keep confidences. When someone shares something deep and personal with you, keep it to yourself. Don’t go blabbing about their secrets to everyone else you meet. Especially if what they share is some sin in their life or a weakness with temptation they have. Don’t let others know about it but support, encourage and pray with that friend and for them that they would have the strength to overcome that temptation and succeed in that battle with sin. And in the same way be vulnerable with them – share your struggles and have them pray for you and encourage you.

Pray: asking God for wisdom in the words we use.

Reflect: do I keep confidences? Am I a trustworthy person?

He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame. (v.13)

Well-known Broadway producer Jed Harris once became convinced he was losing his hearing. He visited a specialist, who pulled out a gold watch and asked, “Can you hear this ticking?” “Of course,” Harris replied.

The specialist walked to the door and asked the question again. Harris concentrated and said, “Yes, I can hear it clearly.” Then the doctor walked into the next room and repeated the question a third time. A third time Harris said he could hear the ticking.

“Mr. Harris,” the doctor concluded, “there is nothing wrong with your hearing. You just don’t listen.”

How true of so many of us today! We need to learn how to listen to God. And we need to learn how to listen to each other. How many times have we gone off the deep end because we have only heard part of a conversation? Or got upset because we didn’t hear the full story? Or did something that turned out to be wrong because we did not pay attention properly? Take time to listen properly and fully. And if something doesn’t sound right check what it is you have heard in case you haven’t understood properly.

It is good to listen to others. What does active listening accomplish? Listening is a way of loving others. It says, “I want to understand and know you.” It comforts the brokenhearted, builds relationships, and encourages faith in God. Listening is also a means of learning the facts. Solomon warned that it is folly to answer a matter before hearing it.

Most of all, listening to others should reflect our attentiveness toward God and His Word. He has so much He wants to teach us and tell us. As you take a moment of stillness today and give Him a listening ear, you’ll be better able to listen to the hurting people around you.

Pray: asking God to help you listen to Him and to others.

Reflect: am I a good listener? Do I take time to listen properly?

A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free. (v.5)

A 12-year-old boy was a key witness in a lawsuit. One of the lawyers, after intense questioning, asked, “Your father told you what to say, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” answered the boy.

“Now tell us,” pursued the lawyer, “what were his instructions?”

“Well,” replied the boy, “Father told me the lawyers would try to tangle me in my testimony; but if I would just be careful and tell the truth, I could say the same thing every time.”

A truthful person has nothing to hide, but the person who lies pays an awful price for his dishonesty. We often think it’s only a little lie and it won’t do any harm but invariably it does. We like to think of white lies over and against black or bad or “real” lies. The truth is a lie is a lie – it is a means of deceiving another. And what happens once we start telling lies is that it becomes difficult to stop. One lie leads to another to cover up the previous one, and eventually the liar is caught in his own web of deceit. Proverbs 19:5 says, ‘*A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free.*’

For a follower of Christ, however, the most important consideration is that truthfulness reflects our relationship with the Lord. Lying is the language of the devil (John 8:44), but those who belong to Christ are to be known as people of truth (Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 3:9). Let us be careful what we say and how we say it. Let us always strive to be people of integrity, just like the little boy in the story.

Pray: asking God to help us walk blamelessly before him.

Reflect: do I tell little lies? Am I person of integrity?

Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise. (v.1)

A long term member of Alcoholics Anonymous wrote this poem:

I drank for happiness and became unhappy.

I drank for joy and became miserable.

I drank for sociability and became argumentative.

I drank for sophistication and became obnoxious.

I drank for sleep and woke up tired.

I drank for strength and felt weak.

I drank for relaxation and got the shakes.

I drank for courage and became afraid.

I drank for confidence and became doubtful.

I drank to make conversation easier and slurred my speech.

I drank to feel heavenly, and ended up feeling like hell.

The Bible deals with all kinds of issues that affect us in life. Here at the start of Proverbs 20 we find the subject matter of alcohol. Alcohol is a big thing in the world today. People like to drink to be sociable. They like to drink for health reasons (we've all heard how a little red wine is good for preventing some disease or other). They like to drink simply because they enjoy the taste. The trouble is that for many in our world today they drink for the wrong reasons – they drink to get drunk and enjoy the feeling it gives. They like the release they get from the worries they have. The trouble is that release is only short-lived. They wake the next day with a sore head and the problems still there.

As the poem suggests people drink for all kinds of reasons but none of them end up satisfying or achieving what they expected. The wise words here remind us that wine is a mocker and if we are led astray by them we are not wise. There is nothing wrong with 'a little wine for the stomach' but the bible's message is clear – don't get drunk and disorderly. If it's satisfaction you are after – put your trust in Christ alone.

Pray: asking God to help us to trust in Christ alone.

Reflect: do I drink too much or for the wrong reasons? Hand it over to God.

*He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.
(v.23)*

It was his first day on the job. He was a new clerk in the green goods department of a super market. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from that goal, but she persisted. Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager." He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?"

Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Considerably relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine."

Later in the day, he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking. He then asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager looked at him and said, "My wife is from Toronto." The boy said, "Oh, what team did she play for?"

It is so easy in life to open our mouths and let our bellies rumble as my Dad would say. We see something, react to it and words come tumbling out of our mouths. Often these are ill thought through and cause all kinds of harm. How often in life do we end up trying to dig ourselves out of a hole we have just made? James reminds us how hard it is to tame the tongue (James 3:1-12). The writer of Proverbs encourages us to guard our tongues for that way we will not end up in trouble. Take time to think before you speak – that is always a good place to start.

Pray: asking God to help us tame our tongues and guard our speech.

Reflect: do I often speak without thinking? Find ways to pause, take a breath and think about what you are about to say.

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (v.6)

Christian educator and author Howard Hendricks cautions parents not to bribe or threaten their children to get them to obey. What they need is firm, loving, and at times painful discipline.

Hendricks recalls being in a home where a bright-eyed school child sat across the table from him. “Sally, eat your potatoes,” said her mother in a proper parental tone. “Sally, if you don’t eat your potatoes, you won’t get any dessert!” Sally winked at Hendricks. Sure enough, mother removed the potatoes and brought Sally some ice cream. He saw this as a case of parents obeying their children rather than ‘*Children, obey your parents.*’ (Ephesians 6:1)

Many parents are afraid to do what they know is best for their youngsters. They’re afraid their children will turn against them and think they don’t love them. Hendricks says, “Your primary concern is not what they think of you now, but what they will think 20 years from now.”

Our verse in Proverbs speaks to us of training up our children well in order that they will not turn from it when they are older. This verse has often been used to tell parents that if they lead their children to the Lord at an early age, then they’ll remain faithful Christians. The heart breaking truth is that sometimes children do wander away from the Lord and never return. However we should strive to teach our children the things of the Lord from a young age (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) and be praying for them always.

What the verse also teaches us is that there are so many things in life we have to teach our children – the basics of living life well. Don’t be afraid to teach them. I learned from my father from a young age the need to be honest and work hard. That has never left me.

Pray: asking God to guard our children and help us bring them up well.

Reflect: what lessons did I learn from my parents? Give thanks to God for your parents.

*Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.
(v.4)*

We live in a materialistic age. Gadgets and luxuries with their glitter and glamour entice even Christians to spend too much energy and money to obtain them. People want the latest iPhone or iPad; the latest and biggest 3D television set; the latest Xbox or Playstation; the latest and coolest designer clothes; the best car and house and so on. As Christians we are not exempt from that. And let's be clear there is nothing wrong with having some of those things. However it does become wrong when it becomes our one true goal in life – to have all the possessions we can. That's why it's important to keep spiritual values foremost in our minds.

The writer of Proverbs suggests here that we should not wear ourselves out in order to get rich. And many of us do. We work hard and long hours in order to get the money to have the lifestyle we crave. He says the wise thing to do is show restraint. I have often heard people say I am just going window shopping. The trouble with that is we see goods and want them and end up buying them. The temptation is too great. We are to restrain ourselves. And he gives us a reason why in the next verse (verse 5). All we have to do is cast a glance at riches and they are gone. Nothing lasts long in this world today.

Have you been putting all of your energies into getting ahead in this world while neglecting heavenly values? Jesus said, '*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life.*' (John 6:27) What is the prime goal of our lives? For what are we working? Jesus asks us today, as He did Peter, '*Do you truly love Me more than these?*' (John 21:15). I wonder what our answer is.

Pray: asking God to forgive us for loving other things above him.

Reflect: do I work for earthly treasure or am I storing up treasures in heaven?

Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering towards slaughter. (v.11)

I heard a story about a man who was on holiday in Mexico. One day he was walking along a deserted beach when he saw a man approaching from the opposite direction. As he watched the man, he saw that the man kept bending down, picking something up and throwing it into the water. As he got closer, he could see that the man was picking up starfish that had washed up onto the beach and he was throwing them back into the water.

As the two men met, he said, “Good morning. I was wondering what you are doing.” “Why, I am throwing these starfish back into the ocean, because if I don’t, they will die.”

“I understand, but there must be thousands of starfish on this beach and you can’t possibly get all of them. Besides, there are hundreds of miles of beaches along this coast and the same thing is happening on every one of those beaches. Can’t you see that you can’t possibly make a difference?” The man bent down and picked up another starfish and threw it back into the ocean. He smiled at the man and said, “I made a difference to that one, didn’t I?”

Solomon urges us to rescue those being led away to death. We know, because our Bibles teach us, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and all are headed for an eternity without God. And yet for some reason we don’t always have the passion of this man on the beach. Our commission is to reach out to a dying world with the good news of the gospel. Let’s get on with it...one person at a time.

Solomon also warned that once our eyes are opened we can’t pretend we don’t know what to do. God, who weighs our hearts and keeps our souls, knows that we know, and holds us responsible to act (v.12). Let’s not shirk away but let’s get on with it...one person at a time.

Pray: asking God to give us a heart for the lost and dying.

Reflect: do I reach out to the lost or do I pretend not to see them?

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat...in doing this you will heap burning coals on his head and the LORD will reward you. (v.21-22)

When the first missionaries came to Alberta, Canada, they were opposed by a young Cree Indian chief named Maskepetoon. But eventually he responded to the gospel and accepted Christ. Shortly afterward, a member of the Blackfoot tribe who hated Maskepetoon killed his father. The chief rode into the murderer's village and demanded that he be brought before him. Confronting the guilty man he said, "You shall ride my best horse and wear my best clothes."

In utter amazement and remorse his enemy exclaimed, "My son, now you have killed me." The hate in his heart had been erased by Maskepetoon's forgiveness and kindness.

We are often hurt and offended by people and we feel like getting our own back with some sharp words of our own or through some harsh action against them. The trouble is all that does is stir up even more hatred in our hearts. And that resentment often leads to us having health related issues – stress, ulcers, high blood pressure and even strokes.

According to Solomon we should feed our enemies and help them, and in so doing we will heap burning coals on them. I don't think this means that we look with glee on someone who is our enemy and think to ourselves, "Oh boy, I get to heap burning coals on his head!" I think the "coals of fire" speaks of conviction. And as we saw in the story the chief's enemy felt the pangs of guilt and remorse as soon as the chief blessed him rather than attacked him. He diffused the situation by showing kindness and not hatred.

Do you have someone that you're angry with? Is there someone at work that has made themselves your "enemy"? Then bless them rather than curse them. Hearts can be changed if I help the one that has hurt me.

Pray: asking God for strength to bless the one who has hurt me this week.

Reflect: how can I better respond to those who hurt and offend me?

As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. (v.21)

In the spring of 1894, the Baltimore Orioles came to Boston to play the Red Sox in what was expected to be a routine baseball game. But what happened was anything but routine. The Orioles' John McGraw got into a fight with Boston's third baseman. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl.

Soon the conflict spread to the grandstands and quickly went from bad to worse. Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark burned to the ground. The fire then spread to 107 other Boston buildings.

Proverbs 26:21 reminds us that '*as charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*' I used to love placing coal and logs on the fire at my grandparent's. I could sit and watch for ages as coal placed on the embers would soon begin to glow and spark, heating up the whole room. Logs were the same and they soon gave off that great crackling sound as they heated up and burned.

How difficult it is to take back angry words! A raised weapon, a clenched fist, and an angry voice all have one thing in common - they are easier to lift up than to put down. Because God loves us and knows the awful danger of strife, He pleads with us not to play with it. We may think that a little conflict makes life (including sports) more interesting, but the Lord wants us to think of its devastating consequences.

We have all been in situations where we react angrily to something said or done and instead of diffusing a situation we enflame it. In the preceding verse we are reminded that without wood a fire goes out and without gossip a quarrel dies down. The challenge for us is to respond well to situations and not to enflame them.

Pray: asking God to forgive you for times you have enflamed situations rather than diffusing them.

Reflect: do I react angrily? How can I learn to be a peacemaker?

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. (v.1)

The following article appeared in a medical magazine: When the physical examination of a 78-year-old man had been completed, the doctor recommended that he come back in 6 months for another check-up. At this suggestion the aged patient shook his head and said, “Doctor, I don’t think I’ll be around then.”

“Nonsense!” replied the physician with a reassuring smile. “You’ll be around for years yet.” The elderly man gave him an odd look, and then explained, “I mean that I’ll be in Florida. I go there every January.”

The story may cause us to smile, but the question it raises is very sobering. Will you and I be around tomorrow, next month, next year? It surely is sensible to make plans for the future, but we must always do so with an awareness of life’s uncertainty. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. All we can do is give our best now and trust God for tomorrow.

All our days are numbered by God. Take advantage of the time God has given you and don’t put things off. Too many people are saving till they reach the golden years, and many times their dreams are never fulfilled. Moses said in Psalm 90:12, *‘teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.’* Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, and don’t put off till tomorrow what you can do today. Tomorrow may never come!

Often the things we put off in the spiritual life are coming to saving faith in Jesus and telling others all about him. Today is the day of salvation – if you have never put your trust and faith in Jesus do it now while you can. And why put off telling your family, friends and colleagues about Jesus – ask for courage and go and share the gospel with them.

Pray: asking God to help us number our days aright.

Reflect: do I put things off? Ask God to help you deal with matters today.

Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully. (v.5)

An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly the Loch Ness monster attacked his boat. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat at least a hundred feet into the air. It then opened its mouth, waiting below to swallow them both. As the man sailed head over heels and started to fall towards the open jaws of the ferocious beast, he cried out, “Oh, my God! Help me!” Suddenly, the scene froze in place and as the atheist hung in midair, a booming voice came out of the clouds and said, “I thought you didn’t believe in Me!” “God, come on, give me a break!” the man pleaded, “Just seconds ago, I didn’t believe in the Loch Ness monster either!” “Well,” said God, “now that you are a believer you must understand that I won’t work miracles to snatch you from certain death in the jaws of the monster, but I can change hearts. What would you have me do?” The atheist thinks for a minute, then says, “God, please have the Loch Ness Monster believe in You, also.” All of a sudden the Loch Ness monster bowed its head and spoke, “Lord, for this food which I am about to receive, I am truly thankful.”

We laugh but there is a serious side to all this. When a person turns their heart to God things begin to make sense. They understand matters which for years gone by had been hidden from them. Solomon puts it like this ‘*those who seek the LORD understand it fully.*’ When we begin to seek after the things of God, he comes by his Spirit and opens our eyes so that we can see. Those who are lost just do not see. They can’t for their eyes are blinded. Perhaps we should be more compassionate on those who do not know the Lord because there are things they just do not see.

As we come to read God’s Word we ought to pray that He opens our eyes to the truths contained within His Word. We ought to ask Him to help us understand it.

Pray: thanking God that He has opened our eyes to the gospel.

Reflect: do I ask God to open my eyes to see the truths of His Word?

A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy. (v.1)

In August 1989, a major fire broke out under an elevated section of New Jersey's Interstate 78. The intense heat buckled parts of the highway and forced the closing of the East Coast artery. The governor said it was the worst transportation crisis in years.

An investigation brought to light a longstanding problem. It revealed that the fire broke out in a dump site in which construction debris had been collecting for many years. The owners of the site had been convicted of a multimillion dollar conspiracy to allow the illegal dumping of construction debris. But appeals in federal and state courts frustrated New Jersey's efforts to clean up the area. Not until the day after the fire did a state appeals court finally order the operator of the dump to stop accepting trash and begin clearing the site.

That fire tells a basic story of life. Most of our problems don't just happen. They are the result of a long series of bad decisions. One bad decision leads to another and they begin to compound. It's like the person who tells a little white lie but soon has to tell another to cover the first and so it goes on until it is out of control. Or the person who is rebuked (as Solomon tells us here) but ignores the rebukes and carries on in sin. But they just keep making it worse until it all ends in disaster.

2 Chronicles 36 illustrates this and reminds us that God will not allow His children to continue in sin. Even though He is longsuffering, His patience has a limit. If we don't correct the problem ourselves, we can be sure that He will discipline us. Let us not be like the stiff-necked man; let us listen to rebuke and correct our ways.

Pray: asking God to reveal sin within in our lives in order that we can confess it and deal with it.

Reflect: do I listen to the rebuke of God and others or am I stiff-necked and ignore it?

Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. (v.8)

Money and the desire of it is all around us. I watched someone come rushing into the local shop recently and spend £20 on lottery scratch cards. They were desperate to have more money. Every week millions of people buy their lottery tickets with the dream of becoming a millionaire. In January 1996 that is exactly what happened to hospital orderly John McGuinness. He won £10 million having been earning just £150 a week for years before. He went out and bought a mansion and some flash cars and some fancy jewellery and gave some away. Yet the remarkable thing is that John says that the money has not made him any happier at all.

At the other end of the scale a minister visited a young man in jail who had been arrested for armed robbery. He was bitter as he spoke of the inner-city school from which he had dropped out because he felt unsafe. He asked, “Why couldn’t I have gone to a better school? Why didn’t someone help me to learn a trade?” He said he committed the robbery because he was sick and tired of having so little while others had so much. Poverty has a down side. It can place people in a position where they are tempted to commit crimes.

Having much does not necessarily make us happy and having little can cause all kinds of issues too. If we have too much we are tempted to turn away from God and I think the evidence for this is all around us as for the last 30/40 years we have gained more and more and people have so much they feel they no longer need God. If we have too little we can be tempted to steal and do silly things to get money.

Solomon recognises this which is why he says in Proverbs 30:8 ‘*give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.*’ Sometimes we are tempted to pray for more and more rather than simply praying for enough to survive the day. Paul learned to be content in each and every situation – whether in plenty or want (Philippians 4:12-13). We would do well to learn that lesson and trust completely in God.

Pray: asking God to give us today our daily bread.

Reflect: am I content with what I have?

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. (v.28-29)

A man decided to make Mother's Day special for his wife. He bought her presents. He took her out to eat. He made life easy for her around the house. But when she later told him what made her weekend really special, she thanked him for something he did during church on Mother's Day. When the men in the church were told they could have the microphone to say something about a special woman in their life, he listened for a while as others spoke. Then, when the last call was given, he rose and spoke ever so briefly about his wife - telling how thankful he was for her godly example. She was moved as he honoured her before others. Those 18 seconds were the highlight of her weekend. She even requested a tape of the service so she could savour his thoughtful words.

When a man does kind things for his wife she appreciates them, but when he compliments her publicly he shows wisdom. When a man says in front of others "you are special to me and I appreciate you" their relationship is enhanced. The husband in Proverbs 31 is praising his wife, acknowledging that she surpasses all others. To him she is the one. Indeed she is '*worth far more than rubies.*' (v.10)

These verses in Proverbs 31 show the character of a godly wife but it is the words near the end that speak of the challenge to me as a man, as a husband and as a father – the challenge to love and honour my wife for who she is. Men, we ought to give thanks to God for the godly wives he has given us. We ought to honour and respect and love them in the home so that we train up our children to do likewise. When we do that our children notice how great our wives are and call their mother's blessed.

Husbands and fathers, renew your commitment to love and honour your wife by kind words, thoughtful actions, and respectful communication. Long after the flowers have died and the perfume is gone, that kind of present will continue to be appreciated. And your children will notice too.

Pray: thanking God for your wife and your mother.

Reflect: do I love my wife and show it?

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. (v.9)

In one of the first scenes in *The Lion King*, Disney's biggest hit movie of the 1990s, the king of beasts teaches his son that a good king must show respect for every creature, from the ant to the antelope. His son inquires, "But, Dad, don't we eat the antelope?" His father replies, "Yes, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass. And the antelope eat the grass. And so we are all connected in the great Circle of Life."

There is an element to which Solomon is referring to a never ending circle here in Ecclesiastes. He looks at life and sees the constant repeats and cynically begins to think that if life is only part of a great cycle over which we have no control, is life worth living? If this cycle is repeated season after season, century after century, why are we unable to understand it and explain it? He looks around and sees that nothing changes (v.4-7), nothing is ever new (v.8-11) and nothing is understood (v.12-18).

And certainly in life we can often think that as we get caught up in the same routines again and again. All of us are bound to repeat ourselves as we go about our daily routines. We eat, sleep, work, and clean up. Then we do the same things again. When the cycle seems endless, we ask, what's the point of it all? You would think too that we would learn from generations passed but we don't. There is nothing new under the sun. The mistakes and sins committed one hundred years ago are repeated again today.

For some people life may be monotonous and meaningless; but it doesn't have to be. For the Christian believer, life is an open door, not a closed circle. Daily we experience God's blessings on our life. True we can't explain everything but life is not built on explanations – it's built on promises and the Bible is full of them. One day the cycle on earth will end and we who trust in Christ will be with him in glory. Let's live life for him now looking forward to that day when we will be with him for ever.

Pray: giving thanks to God for his daily blessings.

Reflect: do I live life to the full or is it all meaningless?

To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. (v.26)

A man stopped at a travel agency and said he wanted to go on a cruise. "Where to?" he was asked. "I don't know," was his reply. So the travel agent suggested that he take a look at a large globe that was in the room. He studied it for some time, then with a look of frustration he exclaimed, "Is this all you have to offer?"

The world in which we live has many things that appeal to us. Apart from what is sinful, we can and should enjoy its pleasures. A delicious meal graced with the good fellowship of friends warms our hearts. The beauties of nature inspire and fill us with wonder. Good music refreshes our souls. And work itself can be fulfilling. Even in a sin-cursed world we can find great enjoyment. And yet these pursuits do not bring full and lasting satisfaction. We often want more.

Solomon has tried them. In the first eleven verses here we see him seek after the selfish things of life – he tries projects, possessions and pleasures but finds that none are satisfying to him. They were probably OK for a while but their enjoyment waned and he is left unsatisfied. And we know that from our own experience too. We try big projects at home or at work but when they are done we are left thinking what next? We buy the latest gadgets and they thrill us for a short time but soon they are out and we ask what next? And we go for the thrills in pleasure but the next day after a night out we think what now?

And he concludes this chapter as he will each section of his book - by realising the importance of accepting life as God's gift and enjoying it in God's will. Life will throw all kinds of things at us, but let's be like Solomon and remember that God has given us this life for a short time until he takes us home to heaven. It's up to us to live life - and be satisfied.

Pray: thanking God for the gift of life and asking him to help us live life well.

Reflect: what do I fill my life with to try and make me happy and content?

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. (v.1)

Scientists working at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Boulder, Colorado, recently created the world's most accurate clock. Called an "optical atomic clock," it's made of an oscillating laser, a mechanism called a "comb" that counts oscillations, with a single mercury atom as the point of reference.

The optical atomic clock "ticks" one quadrillion times per second. Research is ongoing, but this type of clock could be up to one thousand times more accurate than current atomic clocks. Such precise timekeeping might be applied in navigation, communication technology, and deep space exploration.

Time, no matter how it's measured, is one of the inescapable realities of life. God ordained seasons in nature; He built them into the rhythm of life. There are seasons in our lives as well, and in God's plan for history. Solomon grasped that which is why he writes about it in chapter 3. He encourages us to look up and recognise that God orders time. In fourteen statements here Solomon affirmed that God is at work in our individual lives, seeking to accomplish His will. All of these events come from God and they are good in their time. The inference is plain: if we cooperate with God's timing, life will not be meaningless. Everything will be beautiful in its time (v.11).

When we come to realise that, it helps us to cope with difficult and painful experiences in life. We do not often see anything positive in a hard situation but in time to come we look back and see what God was doing and what he was teaching us through those circumstances. God has everything planned out – and for our good (Genesis 50:20; Roman 8:28).

Pray: thanking God for the experiences of your life.

Reflect: do I recognise God's hand in all the experiences of my life?

Two are better than one. (v.9)

When Leo and Amy opened a 300-seat, fine-dining restaurant, Leo admitted he was “scared of everything.” Amy equates their leap of faith in starting their business to holding hands while jumping off a mountain. But if you’re going to do something scary, “you want to do it with someone you know and trust,” Leo continued.

Chris and Karie, another couple who took a risk to own and run a restaurant together, say they have “a good working relationship, as well as mutual admiration for each other’s work.”

Solomon shows us the importance of two being better than one in chapter 4. He begins by looking at people on their own and seeing how oppression, toil and having no friends makes life meaningless. He views the industrious man (v.4) as one who works hard to outdo his neighbour and sees the folly in always trying to get one up on the “Jones”. He is motivated by competition. He then considers the idle man (v.5) who sits back and does nothing. He is motivated by pleasure. Then he suggests that the integrated man (v.6) is the one to follow – he balances work and pleasure. And lastly he discovered the independent man (v.7-8) who worked on his own trying to get richer and richer but finding all was worthless.

The balanced life is the way to go, and even better suggests Solomon when there are two of you to enjoy it. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, knew how crucial it is to have companions in life. He wrote, ‘*Two are better than one*’ (v.9). When one falls during a difficult time, another provides comfort and support (v.10-12). We need our spouses and friends to help us through the scary times and to provide emotional support. Loners make life harder for themselves (v.8). But those who recognise their need for others find help and encouragement.

Pray: thanking God for your partner or a special friend.

Reflect: do I keep myself to myself or do I allow others to support, encourage and help me?

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. (v.4)

We live in an era of unkept promises. Nations sign important treaties and then break them at will. Many couples show little regard for their wedding vows. We make promises to friends and have little problem in ignoring them. Worse still we make all kinds of promises to God often in the heat of dreadful situations and simply ignore them when things get better and God answers our prayers. In this kind of society, we who are God's people should be known for keeping our promises.

The brilliant Christian scholar and writer C. S. Lewis took that truth seriously. He was determined to pay what he had vowed. His biography tells of the suffering he endured because he kept a promise he had made to a friend during World War I. This friend was worried about the care of his family if he should be killed in battle, so Lewis assured him that if that were to happen he would look after them. As the war dragged on, the man was killed. True to his word, Lewis took care of his friend's family. Yet no matter how helpful he tried to be, the woman was ungrateful, rude, arrogant, and domineering. Through it all, Lewis kept forgiving her. He refused to let her actions become an excuse to renege on his promise.

When we make vows and promises before God we ought to keep them – regardless of what they are. Solomon encourages that here at the start of chapter 5. He actually goes as far as to say we would be better not making a promise than not fulfilling it. Unfulfilled promises and broken vows cause all kinds of heartache and pain. They hurt our relationship with another and cause it irreparable damage sometimes.

In the context of what he is writing Solomon is suggesting when we come to worship God we should not open our mouths and make all kinds of empty promises to him – rather we should simply stand in awe of an awesome God and listen to him. Wise words.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for breaking vows and promises.

Reflect: do I always keep my word?

*All of man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.
(v.7)*

As a boy, I laughed and cried as I read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. I gave little thought to the author of these books, though, until I saw a dramatised version of Mark Twain's life.

Twain had his share of tragedy. He blamed himself for his younger brother's death in a steamboat accident at age 20, and for the death of his only son, who died from diphtheria at 19 months. He grieved bitterly over the deaths of two of his daughters - one from meningitis at age 23 and one from a heart attack at age 29. But instead of turning to God, Twain became bitter and pessimistic. When he died at 74, he was desperately lonely, unhappy, and hopeless.

Mark Twain had an emptiness that could not be satisfied with money and fame. His success as a writer only increased his misery and sense of loss. His life illustrates the folly of living without God, which is described in Ecclesiastes 6:7-12. If only he had trusted Christ for salvation and looked to Him for comfort and fulfilment!

And yet many in life do the same. We strive after money and fame but in the end they are worthless. Solomon says here in Ecclesiastes 6 that people have riches but no enjoyment. There is a tragedy here in having all the resources for a satisfying life and yet not being able to enjoy them for one reason or another. Riches are ok but having a relationship with God is worth far more than all the silver and gold in the world. There is an emptiness in our lives that cannot be filled with the pleasures and possessions of the world – only a relationship with God our creator can resolve that emptiness.

If you have riches then be grateful for them, give God thanks for them, and use them for his glory.

Pray: thanking God for all the blessings he bestows upon us.

Reflect: do I gratefully use the gifts God has given me?

A good name is better than fine perfume. (v.1)

When a name is mentioned certain characteristics and traits and thoughts come straight to mind. Some names spark happy thoughts and reflections. If I mention Princess Diana we think of the people's princess; Mother Teresa and we think of care and compassion and love; Billy Graham and a man of integrity and passion for Christ; David Beckham and football star and ambassador for the Olympic Games among other things. Other names spark the opposite as we remember them for all the wrong reasons. If I mention Margaret Thatcher we think of poll tax and miners' strikes; Saddam Hussain and tyranny and war come to mind; Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal.

Many people strive for a good name. A good name is built on a life lived well and of the good character qualities in a person. It is built on integrity. We cannot be one person in church and another outside – people see the hypocrisy and our name will not be good. Having a good name is better than having all the luxuries of the world. Riches and possessions fade away but reputations last a long time.

A solid reputation and loving relationships are high achievements. Honesty, integrity, and generosity in life are more valuable than the most expensive funeral. Perfume fades, but the aroma of our lives lingers on. And that is what Solomon says here in Ecclesiastes 7. He reminds us that our names and reputation will outlive us.

By our attitudes and actions, we are creating the memories that will be associated with our names in life and in death. Today we have an opportunity to renew our commitment to Christ and to the making of a good name - a name that honours Him and encourages those we love for years to come.

Pray: asking God to help us live lives of integrity that glorify him.

Reflect: how can I live a life that encourages others to glorify God?

When I applied my mind to know wisdom...I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. (v.16-17)

Humanity has always strived to know more and more. We have this inbuilt desire to know everything about everything. Do you remember when your kids were younger and they would ask you something and you would give them the answer...then the question would come back but why? And this never ending circle would continue until you lost patience. We crave knowledge – and particularly when it comes to knowledge about God and the beginning of the world.

In recent years we have seen the completion of the Hadron Collider – this massive and costly device that will allow particles to crash together at high speeds. The scientists are hoping this will help them understand the big bang theory and see how it all works – in effect how they think the world came into being.

The trouble with all of this is that our human minds are limited. Some things in life are just beyond our comprehension. And God made it that way. Here in Ecclesiastes 8 Solomon is telling us that as human beings we will simply not understand everything. He became concerned with life's unfairness, observing that people did not always get what it seemed they deserved. So he had to understand what God did and why He did it. Solomon stayed awake night and day to observe the world around him and to arrive at a satisfying answer to his questions. But he concluded that the more he tried to unravel God's ways, the more impossible that became.

Therefore, Solomon turned to a familiar piece of advice: accept the good things God gives us and leave the unsolved mysteries to Him. This is not passive fatalism, but an active decision to leave our questions with God and get on with the things He has given us to do.

Pray: thanking God for all he has done.

Reflect: do I have to know the answers to everything or do I simply trust God?

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. (v.10)

During the American Civil War, Union general George McClellan became well known for being hesitant to respond to the enemy and move his army out into the battle. In 1862, two Union soldiers found a copy of the Confederate army's detailed plans for a campaign in western Maryland, and gave the plans to McClellan. Despite this advantage, McClellan was reluctant and timid in his attack, and the battle of Antietam turned into a bloody carnage.

General McClellan had no reason to hold back with the battle plans in his hands. The time of opportunity was short, and he needed the resolve to move out and take advantage of the moment, which is really what Solomon is calling us to do in today's reading. The setting is very different, of course, but the principle is the same. Life is short, so enjoy God's goodness.

The context for these verses may not seem very upbeat. The subject was the certainty of death for everyone. We might expect Solomon to offer gloomy advice after reflecting on death and its finality. Once again, the wisest person who ever lived counselled his readers to lay aside thoughts of gloom and the shortness of life, and accept what God has given. In case that recurring word "meaningless" bothers you, remember that Ecclesiastes isn't the Bible's only word on the meaning of life.

We are not encouraged to lie down and quit just because life is short and we will one day die. Nor are we encouraged to put all our efforts into trying to understand all the mysteries of life. We are encouraged to get on and live life and enjoy it while we have it. We are encouraged to live life well and tell others about Jesus as we go. We are encouraged to look forward to heaven. And we are encouraged to appreciate the blessings of physical nourishment, love and companionship. Live life well.

Pray: thanking God for all his provision.

Reflect: do I work hard and honour God?

Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious. (v.10)

An entire performance of Rossini's opera, William Tell, lasts about six hours - more than most human voices, or ears, can endure. But its overture (basically the symphonic synopsis of the story) is likely the most well-known piece of music of its kind. It has four parts, all of which are fairly popular: the sunrise on the cello, the storm on the drums and brass, the peaceful pastoral scene by the English horn and flute, and the galloping call of the trumpet - the tune that gave the Lone Ranger his theme.

The four-part construction resembles the four seasons as it summarises the entire six-hour epic through its full circle of emotions in a matter of minutes. Today's passage does much the same thing for the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a string of wise sayings and observations that, in a sense, guide us through the author's entire view of life "under the sun." He is in a sense summarising his thoughts on the importance of wisdom and the danger of folly.

He begins with the foolish ruler. Solomon knows that if one person needs wisdom it is the ruler of a nation. That is why when asked by God for what gift he wanted, Solomon had asked for wisdom. Lyndon Johnson said "A president's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right."

He moves on to foolish workers and shows the folly of working without the right tools and instruments. Foolish talkers are also mentioned and we are reminded of the importance of words – used wrongly they can be destructive. And he finishes with foolish officers who are indulgent, incompetent, indifferent and indiscrete.

Solomon encourages us to avoid folly and live by the wisdom of God – what good advice. Let's watch our words and actions and live life the way God intended us to.

Pray: asking God for wisdom to live life well.

Reflect: do I use my words wisely?

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. (v.6)

Maybe you've seen the fridge magnet, "I'm not indecisive...am I?" We hesitate to cut the grass or wash the car because it might rain. Or we keep putting off a decision until we're positive that nothing will go wrong.

There's nothing wrong with caution. But indecision can be paralyzing when it becomes a way of life, and some people go through life without ever being sure of anything or taking even the smallest risk. Solomon tells us to make the most of our God-given opportunities.

The context of these verses is one of the familiar themes of Ecclesiastes: we don't know the future, and we can't figure out what God does or how He does it. Three times Solomon said, '*You do not know*' (Ecclesiastes v.2, 5, 6), and for good measure he added, '*You cannot understand*' (v.5).

We already know that Solomon did not consider life's shortness or its mysteries as reasons to crawl in a hole and hide. In fact, he used the examples of sea trading and farming to say, "Don't wait for conditions to be perfect, because that will never happen. You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. So go ahead, ship your grain out and plant your seed today while you can."

That's very practical advice for workers, whether you're investing in the stock market or cutting grass. We're not only being urged to try, but to try different things in the hope that some will succeed. This doesn't mean changing jobs every few months. The Bible is giving us permission to explore to the fullest the gifts and opportunities we receive from God. Simply put – get on with it!

Pray: asking God to stop our procrastination.

Reflect: am I waiting on perfect conditions for sharing my faith? Then stop waiting and share it today.

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. (v.13)

From time to time I get asked by students to read their dissertations to pass comment on how well it reads and if its arguments hold out. I often begin by reading the summary, the introduction and then the conclusion. I then read the rest of the paper seeing if what they argue throughout answers the question raised in the introduction and if it truly reflects the conclusion. It might amaze you how many times the arguments throughout are not reflected in the concluding remarks. I then send them back to tighten up the conclusion.

Solomon has thought much on life and its often seeming meaninglessness. Throughout he has encouraged us to enjoy life and be thankful. Through it all he has reached a conclusion and he records it for us here in verse 13. He calls us to '*fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man.*' The most important piece of advice Ecclesiastes has for us is to fear God, or reverence Him and worship Him for who He is. We can live out the fear of God at work by working every day as if He alone were both our only Customer and the only Boss we would ever have to please.

Keeping God's commandments also becomes very practical in our work. We are commanded to do everything to God's glory in the name of Christ, to care for God's workers, and to honour God with the resources He supplies. If that sounds like a heavy duty, remember that God has built enough satisfaction, challenge, and pure pleasure into human work that we can actually enjoy what we do to the fullest.

Solomon says that these things apply to every person (v.14, an alternative to the translation, '*This is the whole duty of man*'). As far as Solomon is concerned, this is the answer. This is how a person enjoys life even in a world that is often unfair and puzzling, filled with things that are ultimately meaningless in terms of eternity.

Pray: asking God for help in living for Him always.

Reflect: do I fear God and keep his commandments daily?

How beautiful you are, my darling! (v.15)

Song of Songs (or Songs of Solomon) is often a hard book to read. People have come up with various ways to interpret it down through the years and each has merit. For our purposes I want to take it at face value and treat it as poetry. This is a book about love, romance and marriage – and we know how precious the human relationship of marriage is to God. In here we find Solomon's days of courting, the early days of his first marriage and then the maturing of his royal marriage through the good and bad days of life.

The scene opens with the girl speaking of all that attracted her to her man. And there is a variety in this which deals with the inner and outer person. How true that is in life too. We are often attracted by the physical appearance and attributes of a person. Their eyes, their hair, their face, their smile. Yet we are attracted too by inner qualities and characteristics that shine through – love for God, humour, integrity, etc. And that is all good – it is the way God made us. We should not concentrate all on outer appearance though as we are reminded in 1 Samuel 16:7 *'The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart.'*

We do see some of her insecurities come through as she asks her lover not to look at her – worrying about her appearance. And in life we are all like that at times – insecure about our physical appearance. I love the way her lover comes to her though and overcomes all of that. He is smitten by her and likens her to a fine mare (maybe not always best gents to say that your wife looks like a horse! – but worked here). More importantly he is encouraging her that she is all he wants and he clearly then wants to treat her to gifts (v.11). Build each other up and help each other overcome those insecurities – we are children of God and are right just the way we are. Treat your lover well – and don't lose that desire for them.

Pray: thanking God for your lover.

Reflect: do I treat my lover well?

Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. (v.14)

One of the immense privileges I have is officiating at wedding ceremonies. The groom is always standing at the front beside me waiting for his bride to come. She is always a few minutes late (bride's prerogative seemingly!) and he is waiting anxiously. Then the moment arrives, the music begins and down the aisle come the bridesmaids with flower girls and page boys. Everyone's eyes are on them...all except the groom. He is waiting. And then into view comes the bride, beautiful in her wedding dress and I often hear the groom sigh and smile...he has been waiting on his bride and has eyes only for her.

And there is sense to which this is what is being shared here in chapter 2. It sounds like they have been having fun out on the hillside, flirting and getting to know each other. And the more they grow to know each other the more in love they are falling. And now he says '*show me your face, let me hear your voice.*' He wants to see her and hear her and touch her. He has eyes only for her

And we should desire our lovers – and them only. Our eyes should be on them and not on any others beside them or around them. The days of eyeing up other guys or girls should be past. When we walk down the street we should no longer be letting out the whistle or letting our eyes linger longingly at some beauty or hunk who has past. Our eyes should be on our lover.

And as if to remind us of this and God's design for marriage between one man and one woman, verse 16 has the girl saying '*My lover is mine and I am his.*' Their love for one another has grown and now they are intent on spending the rest of their lives together in a monogamous relationship that is built on mutual love.

Let's delight in our lover, having eyes only for them, now and always.

Pray: thanking God for his gift of marriage.

Reflect: do I keep my eyes only on my lover?

Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. (v.5)

Three times in the Song of Songs this important warning is repeated: ‘*Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*’ The bride in the poem addresses the warning to the daughters of Jerusalem, who (in this context) are probably young women without adult life experience. And while the interpretation of the warning is debated, I am convinced that it means this: Do not fan the flames of sexual desire and infatuation until they can serve the purpose God intended for them. And that for me means within a loving marriage relationship. Sex is a great gift from God and designed for both our enjoyment as well as for procreation.

We live in days when sexual desires are flamed by saucy adverts on television, by promiscuous behaviour in films and television shows, by provocative stories written in books, and even by the design of clothes that are sold. For a while in my teenage years the message was safe sex. I could never understand why we had moved to this from leave sex for marriage.

The lover here is nearing the end of her courting times. Her love for her man is growing more and more. In each of the opening 4 verses she uses the phrase ‘*the one my heart loves.*’ She desires him more and longs for them to be together for ever. As she awaits her wedding day she warns the daughters of Jerusalem to wait for sex not only until they have the right man but until they are married to that man. This is a message we need to practice if we are courting. This is a message we need to teach our young people.

The chapter concludes with her lover, Solomon, coming for the wedding day and it says ‘*the day his heart rejoiced*’. This has been all they have both been waiting for. Can you remember your wedding day? Are you looking forward to your wedding day? May it be a day of rejoicing.

Pray: thanking God for the wonderful gift of sex in marriage.

Reflect: do I use promiscuous and provocative language that could lead others to ignore God’s teaching on sex in marriage?