

LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Journal of a Desperate Journey
Selected Verses in Ecclesiastes



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Living on the Ragged Edge is a study of the book of Ecclesiastes, and it's for folks who live in the trenches—down there where it's dark and dirty and full of responsibility, where the grit of reality mixed with the grind of accountability holds people's feet to the fire. It's for real people who cannot free themselves from the demands of competition or escape the pressures of deadlines. All the messages in this study will offer straight talk on coping with life as it *really* is.

No matter where you live, it isn't long before you realize that you're back on the ragged edge of reality . . . especially if you're the type who wants to make a contribution to this world before you're six feet under.

Solomon, David's brilliant son who followed his dad as king of Israel, came to realize that nothing is worthwhile—everything is futile.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Introductory Matters

One doesn't need to be a Hebrew scholar to realize that Solomon's outlook was pretty bleak. Solomon, a man of great wisdom, went through a maddening period in his life when everything lost its luster, when the very roots of his life were loosened. With clenched fists and cynical words, Solomon called into question the most basic issues of existence. The man kept a journal of that dark and desperate journey that has been preserved for all to read. It is not only the story of one man's experience but of all who attempt to live their lives apart from God.



Quotable

*Pleasure promises
more than it can
deliver. And our
hope for it is always
greater than its
actuality. Don't
grab the lie.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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2. General Survey: The Flow of the Journal (Ecclesiastes 1–12)

Learn the structure and flow of thought in the book of Ecclesiastes:

- Introducing the Journey (Ecclesiastes 1:1–11)
- Pursuing and Exploring Life (1:12–6:9)
- Reflecting and Summarizing (6:10–11:6)
- Being Young and Growing Old (11:7–12:8)
- Drawing Some Final Conclusions (12:9–14)



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Life Below the Sun

The phrase “under the sun” is repeated twenty-nine times in the Hebrew Old Testament and all in Ecclesiastes. It’s the realm characterized by grievous labor (Ecclesiastes 1:3, 14; 2:11, 17–22; 8:17), endless cycles (1:9), injustice and wickedness (3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:12; 6:1; 8:9; 9:3), and a short lifespan (5:17; 6:12; 8:15). It’s the material world of earthly pleasure and chance (9:6, 9), the human experience considered apart from God. In today’s world, the philosophical equivalents would be secular humanism (that humanity is supreme in the universe), materialism (that the physical universe is all there is), naturalism (that the natural flow of the universe is not disrupted by the supernatural), agnosticism (that we don’t know if God exists), and even atheism (that there is no God to whom we’re accountable).



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LET'S LIVE IT

How does Solomon's journal relate to *our* journeys? We must understand that:

- The lure of something *better*—something more than what we have—is forever with us.
- The temptation to *go for it* is often so strong, it blinds us to consequences . . . it creates an irresponsible “itch” that begs to be scratched.
- This book stands as timeless proof that without God, apart from His presence and His approval, *nothing* satisfies!

Do you invest all of your time, talents, and treasures in some uncertain future when you believe you'll finally reap the rewards, or do you treat each day as a unique gift to be enjoyed and used to God's glory?



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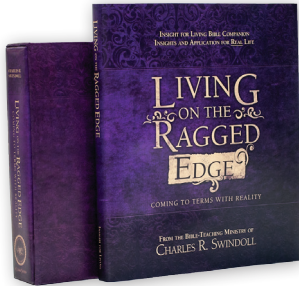
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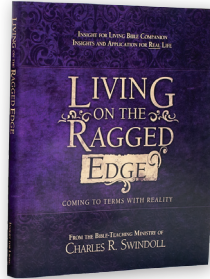
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Chasing the Wind

Ecclesiastes 1:1–18



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Boredom. Monotony. The unchanging drag of life is an inescapable, undeniable reality. Just look around. How many people do you know who regularly wake up each morning motivated about the day? How many individuals genuinely enjoy their occupation? Or anticipate a new week with delight? Or feel challenged and excited about their marriage? Or insert creative ideas and activities into their day to keep life full of zest and enthusiasm? Aside from a few exceptional occasions, most folks live lives of quiet desperation. They see no future in their employment, little hope for their marriage, a lack of challenge in whatever pursuit they might undertake, and strong doubt that things will ever change. Life to most adults is nothing more than chasing the wind . . . empty, futile, purposeless, grinding boredom. Such is one's existence “under the sun.” And to make matters worse, not even the alleged *enjoyments* bring lasting satisfaction—vacations, travel, cruises, extravagant possessions, sexual escapades, delicious food, booze, professional entertainment, and a dozen others. When the brief excitement ends, the inevitable monotony returns. This is the bold, dreary message of this lesson.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Exposing the Lies about Life

There are several lies about life that are often repeated as proverbial axioms—as undeniable truths or heartwarming principles to help people smooth out life's ragged edges. Let's look at four examples of piping-hot concoctions from the world that can scald the unwary.

- “Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.”
- “Every day and in every way our world is getting better and better.”
- “There's a light at the end of every tunnel.”
- “Things never are as bad as they seem. So dream, dream, dream.”



Quotable

*Busy lives appear
to have substance.*

*But busyness is
often a cheap
substitute for a
life without God.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Chasing the Wind

Ecclesiastes 1:1–18

2. Telling the Truth about Existence (Ecclesiastes 1:1–18)

Why do people believe and spread lies about where to find meaning in life? They believe this world can provide purpose and happiness if they just hold on long enough. But the hope to which they cling ignores the fact that the world is corrupt, work is unfulfilling, and people are selfish. Life apart from God is not a bowl of cherries. Let's take a look at the truth about life "under the sun" as expressed most eloquently by King Solomon.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

A Studied Examination of Life

In Ecclesiastes 1:13, the Hebrew word translated "seek" is *darash* and means to study and seek out the application of wisdom.¹ The second word translated "explore" is *tur*, which means to "find out how to do something."² Solomon used his wisdom to find true meaning and joy in life. Together these two words imply a very in-depth, broad, and thorough search of both theoretical and practical knowledge.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Chasing the Wind
Ecclesiastes 1:1–18



LET'S LIVE IT

Let's think through the practical ramifications of Solomon's words in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. Stop and let these thoughts sink in:

- If there is nothing but *nothing* “under the sun,” our only hope must be beyond it.
- If a man who had everything investigated *everything visible*, then the one thing needed must be invisible.

Few people have learned the secret of seeing the invisible and hearing the inaudible. All others are merely “chasing the wind.” Are you living beyond the sun, or are you chasing the wind?

ENDNOTES

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 205.
2. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1064.



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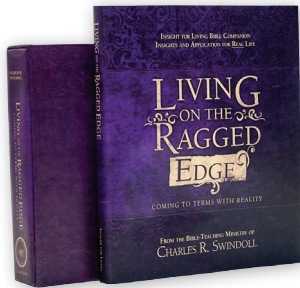
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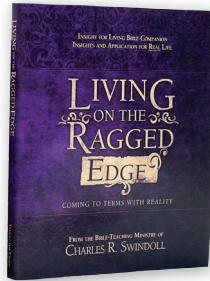
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Ecclesiastes 1:1–18



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Eat, Drink, . . . and Be What?

Ecclesiastes 2:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Fast-lane living is not limited to twenty-first century citizens. Solomon cut that swath centuries ago. Pushing aside all restraints, ignoring every twinge of guilt, the man set out on a quest for pleasure that would make the sensual lifestyle in Vegas pale in comparison. Solomon's world was a cafeteria. Hedonism was *never* pursued with greater commitment. When he laughed, it was nothing short of an uproar. When he drank, it was with limitless intensity. His sexual escapades knew no bounds. Even his meals became lavish, luxurious feasts. Solomon embraced the lure of self-gratification with extreme determination. No project was too lavish, no dream a mere fantasy; whatever he imagined, he lived out. We're talking maximum involvement! And, as we shall discover . . . maximum emptiness.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. What's Up? Look Around.

"If it feels good, do it!" This is the "golden rule" of our postmodern generation. It comes in different forms, all of which point to the same philosophy of hedonism as a means of finding fulfillment in life. Philosophical hedonism draws on an ancient belief that because the material world is all there is and because humans are only physical beings, joy and purpose can only come from pleasurable experiences through the five senses.



Quotable

*I invite you to
do a courageous
thing—face the
truth, admit where
you are, peel off
the mask, and talk
to God.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Eat, Drink, . . . and Be What?

Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

2. What's New? Listen Well. (Ecclesiastes 2:1–10)

As king of Israel, Solomon had the greatest political clout in the Near East and ready access to whatever he desired. During what could be considered an ancient “midlife crisis,” that wise and wealthy king took advantage of his time, wealth, and wisdom, applying them toward a vigorous pursuit of happiness in the world “under the sun.” He pursued every kind of pleasure, engaged in building projects, and sought the good life.



A CLOSER LOOK

Is Asceticism Christian?

Is getting pleasure out of this world bad? Does God want us to go through life abstaining from the sights, sounds, scents, sensations, and sweetness of His physical creation?

It's true that there are some Christian “ascetics” who believe all pleasure in this world is sin—or at least will lead to sin. Their view of the ideal Christian is the puritan hiding himself away in a monastery, avoiding any contact with the evil, physical world. They view God as a white-clad, cosmic killjoy who scans the earth to put the kibosh on anybody having a good time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Pleasure is not bad. God created the world and gave us five senses to enjoy His creation. In fact, Paul himself told Timothy that extreme asceticism—denying people the enjoyment of things of this world—is a sign, not of spiritual Christians but of heretics and false teachers, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude” (1 Timothy 4:4). Yet the enjoyment of God's gifts should be accompanied by an attitude of thankfulness and joy, returning glory to God for His graces, as Paul taught in another place, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Religious asceticism is a legalistic pursuit that replaces God's wonderful gifts with our own self-righteousness and suggests that God never intended for people to live joyous, abundant lives in the physical universe He created. The solution is to accept God's intention for the physical universe and our place in it and to return thanks to Him for His glorious gifts.



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Eat, Drink, . . . and Be What?
Ecclesiastes 2:1–11



LET'S LIVE IT

So what's wrong with living a life like Solomon's? All the sensual pleasures he experienced "under the sun" promise painful consequences.

- They hold out promises that lack staying power. Their initial ecstasy leads to ultimate agony and futility.
- They disillusion us and turn us into cover-up artists.
- They offer to open our eyes but, in reality, blind us.

How do you determine whether or not to engage in certain pleasurable activities? Let's learn from Solomon.

- If it feels good . . . think about it, question it, and appraise it!
- If it lacks substance and carries with it consequences . . . reject it!

What frantic pursuits are you engaged in that promise fullness but deliver only emptiness? Are you turning to God for fulfillment and a proper perspective on the good material gifts He's given you to enjoy?



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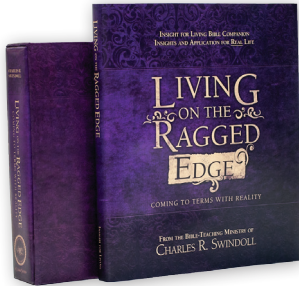
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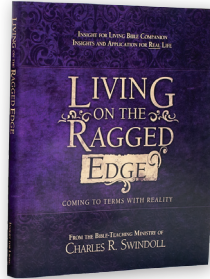
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

More Miles of Bad Road
Ecclesiastes 2:12–26



LET'S BEGIN HERE

With disillusionment and despair casting ever-enlarging shadows across his path, the writer of this journal began to intensify his reactions. Intellectualism didn't satisfy. Pleasures finally fell flat, landing with a dull thud. Laughter failed to lighten life's load. Possessions, projects, parks, livestock, collections of precious gems, slaves, singers, and even sex did nothing to remove the monotony of existence. As life continued to cave in all around Solomon, he pondered the possibility of things changing in the *next* generation. "Maybe the answer lies in those who come after me," he mused. But, as we shall see, not even that gave him any hope. The result? Twice he said it: "I hated life. . . . I hated all the fruit of my labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:17–18). Doesn't anything work? Isn't there any pursuit that will truly satisfy?



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Glance Back

At this point in his desperate journey, Solomon described the utter frustration he felt after having traveled down paths that led to emptiness. They were all "vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). He had tried intellectual pursuits, comic relief, building projects, and sensual pleasures (1:1–2:11). Although some of these produced good feelings for a time, all of them had no lasting benefit. Yet running into a few dead ends wouldn't stop Solomon. In Ecclesiastes 2:12–23, he recounted three more routes he took and what he discovered along the way.



Quotable

*The price we pay
for building an
empire is we don't
build into our
family. We can't
afford that cost.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

More Miles of Bad Road

Ecclesiastes 2:12–26

2. The Search Continues (Ecclesiastes 2:12–23)

The next leg of Solomon's journey included three distinct paths of mental exploration. Solomon compared and contrasted: wisdom and folly (Ecclesiastes 2:12–17); the immediate and the ultimate (2:18–21); and daily work and evening relief (2:22–23).



GETTING TO THE ROOT

The Groan of Futility

For “futility” in Romans 8:20, Paul used the Greek word *mataiotes*. The Greek translation of Ecclesiastes uses the same word for “vanity” or “futility” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, etc.). In Romans 8:18–23, Paul used several complementary terms to describe the futility of this present world. He used “sufferings,” “anxious longing,” “slavery to corruption,” “waiting eagerly,” and “groans.” All of these terms express a sense of emptiness in all things “under the sun.”



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Coming to Terms with Reality

More Miles of Bad Road
Ecclesiastes 2:12–26



LET'S LIVE IT

With a flash of insight, Solomon discovered the essential part of the equation for meaningfulness. In Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, Solomon underscored the dilemma by concluding that:

- Human beings have no inner ability to extract enjoyment and purpose from the things they do or to make these things worthwhile.
- Enjoyment is God's personal gift for those who walk closely with Him. This view cuts across the secular mentality which says that the world gives joy and God steals joy.
- Those who are right with God derive the benefit of *everyone's* labor.

Evaluate your life and your walk with God. Do you find satisfaction in life? Are you receiving God's gift of joy? Why, or why not?



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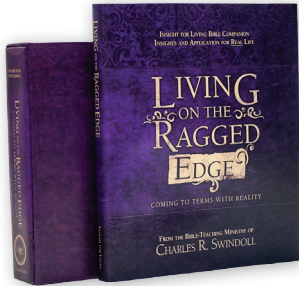
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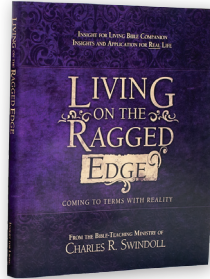
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Do You Know What Time It Is?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Will time last forever or will it ultimately come to an end? Because humans invented the clock, then obviously that device will not accompany us into eternity. The planets that God Almighty arranged in space continue to be the most perfect chronometer ever created, but when those planets stop, well, time stops. So even time is temporary. And that means we need to invest it wisely and find ways to enjoy it while it is ours to claim.

Ecclesiastes 3 provides a necessary and relieving break from the frenzied, hard-driving, seldom-resting business person of the latter half of Ecclesiastes 2. Because our time is short and the seasons of life keep going in a seeming endless cycle, Solomon addressed two questions: Are we able to affect or alter life's events, and are these events moving toward any ultimate objective?



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Time: Some Random Thoughts

Before turning to Solomon's description of life under the sun, let's answer a few difficult but necessary questions about time.

- *What is time?* Time is the way we measure events and the passing moments of our lives. Though He is beyond it, God created time—past, present, and future—to provide order to the many events that would occur in the history of the world.
- *Why is time important?* Time is completely irretrievable. Once a unit of time has passed, it can't be recaptured or reversed. So we must make the most of the time we have.
- *When will time end?* In the new heaven and new earth, events will still proceed in logical order (Revelation 21:1–22:5), but time as we know it will come to an end. The cycles of day and night will cease, and the measurement of time will become obsolete.



Quotable

*Each morning,
God deposits
86,400 seconds
into your bank
of time. But nothing
carries over to
the next day.
Spend it well!*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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Do You Know What Time It Is?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–11

2. Life: Measured according to Its Events (Ecclesiastes 3:1–10)

In Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, Solomon presented a series of snapshots of real life—pictures of reality that capture the good and bad, the positive and negative. While most of us fill our photo albums or scrapbooks with only positive memories, Solomon portrayed life in its stark reality, including not only laughter and love but also hardship and pain.

Then in Ecclesiastes 3:9, Solomon asked an all-encompassing question to help us evaluate the events in our lives. Based on Solomon's question, *what is the profit* of the inevitable ups and downs in life, and *what is the purpose* of these divinely timed life events?



GETTING TO THE ROOT

What Time Is It?

Solomon used two Hebrew words for “time” in Ecclesiastes 3:1. The first, *zeman*, means “appointed time” and occurs only three other times in the Old Testament (Nehemiah 2:6; Esther 9:27, 31). In each case, it refers to the allotted time for an event to occur. The second word, *aet*, is far more common and refers to the time that an event occurs.¹



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Coming to Terms with Reality

Do You Know What Time It Is?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–11



LET'S LIVE IT

Finally, in Ecclesiastes 3:11, Solomon made several all-important conclusions:

- *Regarding time:* God makes all things beautiful in their time.
- *Regarding life:* God has placed eternity in our hearts.

What time is it for you? In what season of life do you find yourself? Is it tragic, unfair, or beautiful? Are you still searching for meaning and purpose “under the sun”?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 773.



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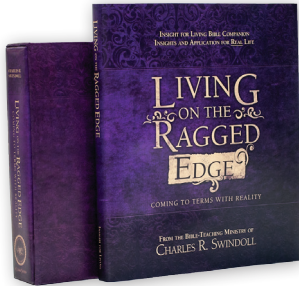
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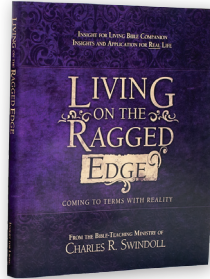
Do You Know What Time It Is?
Ecclesiastes 3:1–11



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Interlude of Rare Insight
Ecclesiastes 3:11–15



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Solomon had been in the pits. Having engaged in numerous projects, pleasures, and pursuits, none of which yielded any lasting satisfaction, the man foundered. Life seemed terribly boring . . . until he caught a brief glimpse of purpose in it all. That occurred when he mentally slipped *above* the sun, *beyond* the earth, and caught a ray of hope from God's vantage point. He momentarily entertained a few thoughts with the Lord God in focus. This interlude, though brief and rare, brought into perspective several things Solomon had missed in his search for purpose and direction in life.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Life without God

During his momentary period of illumination, Solomon didn't doctor his drab world with costumes, props, or computer graphics. Solomon didn't delude himself into thinking that he could find meaning on his own. He dealt with the reality of life on the ragged edge—he didn't smooth it over but called it like he saw it. King Solomon concluded that life apart from God is boring, empty, profitless, and purposeless.



Quotable

*Everything God
does is thorough.
It's never too little.
It's never too much.
There's never
anything missing.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Interlude of Rare Insight

Ecclesiastes 3:11–15

2. Life with God (Ecclesiastes 3:11–15)

After spending several pages in his journal describing the depressing life without God, the tone and perspective abruptly changed. Without warning, Solomon's desperate journey turned from focusing on human activities to:

- *What God Makes* (Ecclesiastes 3:11): God makes everything beautiful in its time, and God makes everybody curious about the future!
- *What God Gives* (3:12–13): God gives us the ability to rejoice, the capacity to do good, an appetite for food and drink, and the perspective to see good in all of our labor.
- *What God Does* (3:14–15): What God does is permanent, thorough, and complete. God's actions cultivate respect for Him, and He patiently teaches us the same lessons over and over until we learn them.



A CLOSER LOOK

Common Grace

King Solomon concluded that life apart from God is unfulfilling and pointless. Yet all of us have encountered unbelievers who still appear to experience happiness and excitement in life. Does that contradict Solomon's conclusions?

Unbelievers and the ungodly still experience temporary enjoyment in life, even apart from a saving relationship with Christ. But how? Our loving heavenly Father extends common grace to all people, even those who reject Him. Several forms of common grace include natural revelation (Romans 1:18–20), sunshine and rain (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:16–17), the order of human government (Romans 13:1–2), and the presence of truth and beauty in the world (Philippians 4:8).

Though unbelievers experience blessings and joy in the present, God has stored up justice and wrath for judgment day. On the other hand, while believers experience the common effects of a sinful world now, in the world to come they will receive the full blessings of salvation.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Interlude of Rare Insight
Ecclesiastes 3:11–15



LET'S LIVE IT

Solomon described the kind of life that can only come *from God*:

- Life from God comes from *outside* the physical realm, not from within it.
- Life from God is supernatural power *now*, not a vague force limited to “a long time ago.”

Where are you looking to find purpose in life? To God or to empty pursuits? Are you living life by God's power?



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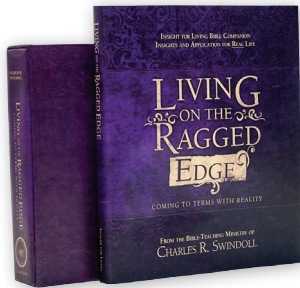
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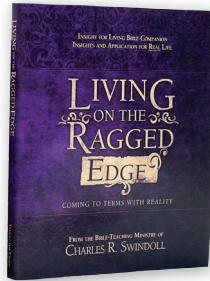
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Confessions of a Cynic
Ecclesiastes 3:16–22



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In the final paragraph of Ecclesiastes 3, we find Solomon alone with his thoughts—thoughts that are disturbing and painful. He had been active in his pursuits and projects. He had engaged the help of others in much of his activity, certainly during the extensive works of erecting buildings, planting gardens, digging reservoirs and irrigation canals, providing entertainment, and a dozen other involvements (Ecclesiastes 2:4–10). But in this passage, he pulled aside from his labor and mused. He observed and meditated and evaluated. He even talked to himself! In doing so, he admitted his disillusionment and his confusion. As he realized the inequities, the injustices, the unfair treatment, the greed and pride and beastly arrogance of people all around him, he recorded his reactions. As we shall see, he also came to some of his own “under-the-sun” conclusions.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. General Reminders about the Book

In his journal, Solomon the cynic pounded home the certainty that life apart from God has no purpose, no meaning, no satisfaction, and no substance. So far, his perspective had been strictly horizontal and confined to “under-the-sun” realities. Solomon observed the terrible effects of injustice, affliction, and suffering, all of which lead many to shake their fists at heaven and challenge God to either straighten things out or get off the throne.



Quotable

*Most of the time,
we can't change
our lot. We can
only change our
reaction to it.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Confessions of a Cynic
Ecclesiastes 3:16–22

2. Specific Comments from the Writer (Ecclesiastes 3:16–22)

King Solomon discovered a problem that sent him into his slump of cynicism. Although people long for wrongs to be righted, their desire for justice is often dashed to pieces like china on a tile floor. But Solomon proposed two solutions to the problem of injustice. First, we must realize that *injustice will have only a temporary reign*. God will judge and make all things right. Second, we must accept the fact that *injustice reveals our beastlike behavior*. But Solomon warned us about the dangerous ditches of cynicism that lie on either side of the precarious path of life. It can keep us bogged down when we should be facing head-on the ugly realities of life and enjoying the good things God has given us.



A CLOSER LOOK

Moral Law and the Law-Giver

Everybody knows when they've been treated unfairly. Our innate understanding of right and wrong sets off an internal alarm when injustice occurs. Although imperfect, limited, and often numbed by sin, our conscience waves a red flag of warning when it detects a breach of God's moral law (1 Samuel 24:5; Romans 2:14–15).

Everyone expects others to follow some moral codes. Even those who say there is no moral order demand to be treated with fairness, courtesy, and dignity. It's therefore ironic that Solomon, viewing the world from an attitude of pessimistic cynicism, pointed to the presence of injustice as evidence that humans are not better than beasts. But the fact that people can at times discern good from evil and beauty from ugliness, is an indication that humans are made greater than animals.

Depending on our perspective, we will view the obvious presence of injustice in the world as either a sign that life is meaningless, humans are beast-like (cynical), and there is no justice, or we will discern an intention for humanity that goes beyond our present experiences, orients us toward a future age of righteousness, and points to a universal Law-giver who is infinitely concerned about us.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Confessions of a Cynic
Ecclesiastes 3:16–22



LET'S LIVE IT

Solomon does not exhort us to try to understand our unjust circumstances, to retaliate with bitterness, or retreat into our closets and suffer alone. He does suggest that we reject self-pity and revenge and seek out ways to find the advantages in our disadvantages. In short, we may not be able to alter our lot in life, but we can change our response to it. This leads to a few very personal and practical questions that can help us reorient our hopeless cynicism toward hopeful realism.

Are you wasting your life in self-pity? Or are you waiting expectantly for God to use your pain to bring glory to Him and courage to others?



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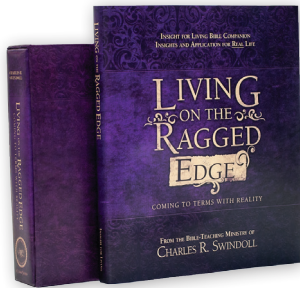
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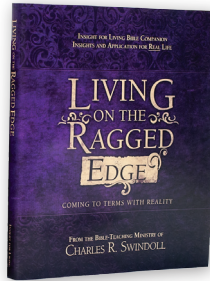
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog

Ecclesiastes 4:1–8



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We are inundated with books, seminars, educational courses, and motivational speeches on the subject of top-level management and success-oriented leadership. The hype has never been greater nor the lure more effective. It is easy to get the impression that once one achieves such an impressive status, satisfaction and a great, liberating sense of pleasure are discovered . . . much like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The long-awaited dream, however, is more often than not a distress-ridden nightmare. Instead of finding relief and companionship, the chief executive officer has a head-on collision with anxiety, pressure, jealousy, politics, ruthless decisions, economic headaches, and inescapable loneliness. Solomon said it all centuries ago. His words live on. May we hear them well and heed their cry. Those who fail to do so are identified in Scripture as fools.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Realistic View from the Top (Ecclesiastes 4:1–8)

As Solomon sensed the invisible pyramids of power, he saw people who had reached the top and those below who were still clawing their way up. He observed military officers, political leaders, and the other “top dogs” of his day, then recorded what he found. Solomon discovered that oppressive conditions lead to despair, that competitive determination leads to burnout, and that compulsive drive leads to disillusionment. This is what life “under the sun” looks like—life apart from the healthy balance and holy perspective infused by a relationship with God.



Quotable

*Nothing physical
satisfies the soul.
Remember that.
The soul belongs
to God. He alone
can gratify it.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog

Ecclesiastes 4:1–8

2. A Penetrating Example from the Lord (Luke 12:15–21)

In Luke 12:15–21, Jesus told a parable that illustrates the tragedy and futility of workaholicism as a means of finding satisfaction for what are really spiritual needs. As you look at this passage, note the workaholic tendencies of the main character. He was already rich (Luke 12:16). He took on extra projects to maintain his excess (12:18). His plans pointed to enjoyment in the future rather than contentment in the present (12:19). He was focused on earthly treasures instead of heavenly treasures (12:21).

Material gain will never satisfy our spiritual hunger. Neither will power, prestige, nor success. If we pursue these things with the passion of a workaholic, we might gain the world for a time, but we could forfeit blessings in eternity (Matthew 16:26).



A CLOSER LOOK

God's Warning about Priorities

What do the following passages say about priorities?

	Priorities
Matthew 6:24	
Matthew 6:31–33	
Philippians 2:3–4	
1 Peter 4:8	



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog
Ecclesiastes 4:1–8



LET'S LIVE IT

Solomon's observations leave Christians with two transforming truths and two haunting questions:

- Possessions ought to satisfy, but they *never* will!
- Priorities ought to come automatically, but they *never* will!

Are you telling yourself the truth about possessions? Are you hearing God's warning about priorities?



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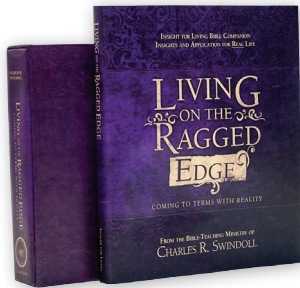
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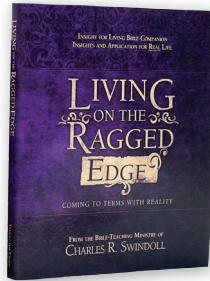
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

One Plus One Equals Survival
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Loneliness has been called the most desolate word in the English language. But it's more than a word. To many, it is a fact of life, especially for those who make it to the top (as we saw in the previous message) and begin to live distant and unaccountable lives. As Solomon finished describing that grim scene, he felt the need to offer a better plan, which led him into the thoughts we're considering today. If we take his counsel to heart, we'll discover one of the most important truths in all Scripture: two really are better than one. And upon discovering and applying Solomon's words, we learn how to survive these lonely, desolate days between here and eternity.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Common Cries of the Lonely

If we were to stop and listen to the lonely people around us or search our own hearts for that desperate cry of dereliction, we might hear something like the following:

- “*Why don't people love me and help me out of this?*” This cry flows from a heart bent on blaming others. In order to have companionship in times of need, we must have cultivated friendships before a crisis begins. Difficulties don't attract friends, but friends remain true through difficulties.
- “*If only others realized how difficult I have it.*” This is the lament of self-pity. Few responses will ruin a relationship more quickly than this one. In fact, it's an attention-getter that quickly wears out another person's patience.
- “*Nobody really cares. I'm all alone in this.*” These words reflect a martyr-mentality. Of course, if nobody knows about another's heartache, they certainly can't be blamed for not responding in a helpful manner.



Quotable

We all need a companion or friend. Why? Mutual support helps us when we're vulnerable.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

One Plus One Equals Survival
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

2. Survival Counsel for the Lonely (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12)

Bemoaning the fact that we're lonely won't help us. Instead, we need to recognize that companionship is the solution to our feelings of alienation, isolation, and abandonment. Although God is the ultimate fulfillment of our desire for companionship, He has chosen to meet that need through others. God intentionally created people both to need others and to meet others' needs.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Two Are Better Than One

In Ecclesiastes 4:9, the phrase translated “good return for their labor” may also be translated “a good outcome from their trouble.” The word *amal* (“labor”) often means “trouble” in the Old Testament, as in Genesis 41:51; Job 5:6–7; and Jeremiah 20:18.¹ In each case, when two people toil together, they can share the burden and accomplish more.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

One Plus One Equals Survival
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12



LET'S LIVE IT

Here are some biblical examples that prove Solomon's words true:

- Elijah and Elisha: Companions calm the troubled waters of our souls.
- Naomi and Ruth: Companions build bridges of hope and reassurance when we feel exposed and self-conscious.
- David and Jonathan: Companions take our part when others take us apart.

Do you have any true companions? If so, how have they supported and encouraged you? If not, will you begin cultivating one abiding friendship today?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 765.



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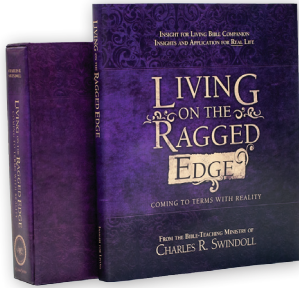
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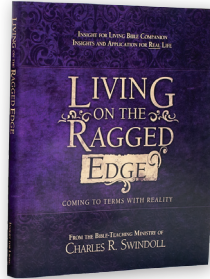
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

What Every Worshiper Should Remember

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7; Hebrews 4:12–13



LET'S BEGIN HERE

So much of this ancient journal is horizontal musing, the bitter and barren side of life seen through the eyes of a cynic—Solomon himself. But on a few, rare occasions, the book is punctuated with remarkable vertical insights that scrape away the façade of empty religion and drive us back to the reality of a meaningful relationship with God. This passage is one of those occasions. Like a cool oasis in the middle of a hot, dry desert, these seven verses provide refreshment to a soul weary from horizontal pursuits. Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 allows the Christian to take a few steps away from occupational involvements and into the Lord's presence . . . to worship and focus on Him. What's to be remembered? How are we to think and respond?



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Word of God: Hope for Our Times

Solomon describes how reverence for God and His Word leads to the right perspective:

- *What God's Word Does:* It pierces and cuts through the garbage, the fog, and the thick veneer of our phoniness and our rationalizations. It judges and sifts out our thoughts and motivations.
- *Why God's Word Works:* It is universal in scope and crosses all cultural, generational boundaries and touches every conceivable realm of experience. And it is limitless in exposure—it's impossible to hide from, dodge, or shield ourselves from its razor edge.



Quotable

*Keep short
accounts. Keep
your promises.
Keep your vows.*
— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

What Every Worshiper Should Remember

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7; Hebrews 4:12–13

2. The Worship of God: Truth for Our Minds (Ecclesiastes 5:1–7)

In Ecclesiastes 5:1–7, Solomon shifted his focus to worship, which provides an oasis of hope in the desert of despair and lifts our perspective above the sun, to God Himself. Corporate worship ushers us spiritually into the very throne room of God. If we're feeling weary of worship, we must address this condition immediately rather than wait to see if it gets better on its own. Solomon gave four specific commands on how to conduct ourselves in worship along with four corresponding reasons for obeying them:

- Draw near and listen well because God is communicating.
- Be quiet and stay calm because God hears the inaudible and sees the intangible.
- Make a commitment and keep it because God believes it and doesn't forget it.
- Don't make a vow now and deny it later because God never overlooks our decisions.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

God's Sword

Several words are used in Hebrews 4:12 to describe the attributes of the Word of God. First, it is “living.” The Greek words *zao*, “to live,” and *zoe*, “life,” are connected with the Word of God in several New Testament passages (Matthew 4:4; 1 Peter 1:23; Philippians 2:16; 1 John 1:1), pointing to its life-giving work. The word *energes*, “active,” from which we get the word “energy,” refers to the effective power of the Word, that which “performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). From the word *kritikos*, “able to judge,” we get our word “critic.” It indicates the deep probing nature of the Word's activities. In the hands of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God is alive, energizing, and critical, and no believer can escape its transforming power.



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

What Every Worshiper Should Remember
Ecclesiastes 5:1–7; Hebrews 4:12–13



LET'S LIVE IT

In conclusion, Solomon shares a warning that, if heeded, will give us strength in life:

- *Fear God:* We must take God seriously, hold Him in high regard, and refuse to play games with Him.

Do you take time to listen to the Lord? Do you take God seriously and obey Him?



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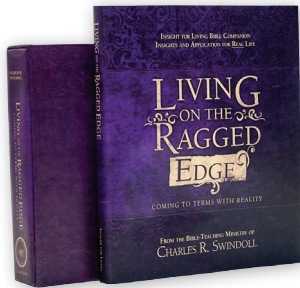
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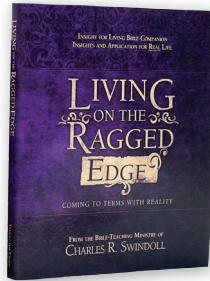
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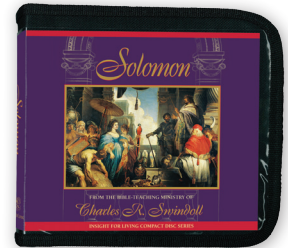
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MM10

LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Straight Talk to the Money-Mad
Ecclesiastes 5:8–20



LET'S BEGIN HERE

There's an old Japanese proverb that says, "Getting money is like digging with a needle; spending it is like water soaking into sand." We all nod in agreement. Who hasn't known the struggle of financial frustrations? And even those who have plenty become disillusioned because money does not satisfy. As Seneca the Roman once stated, "Money has never yet made anyone rich." But on we go, pushing and striving, planning and struggling to earn more so we can have more, then invest more and enjoy more. Fat chance! The more time we spend earning more money to buy more stuff, the less time we have to enjoy our stuff. Solomon addressed this dilemma in the verses we will examine in this message. He not only exposed the issues, he came to some conclusions worth hearing and heeding. But beware! This is not your typical "think and grow rich" advice. God is speaking about money here. We'd be wise to listen.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Proverbial Principles to Learn (Ecclesiastes 5:8–12)

Solomon's first statements regarding wealth suggest proverbial principles, snapshots of life that illustrate profound truths about the deceptiveness of wealth. These deal in turn with oppression, dissatisfaction, and frustration.

- *Regarding Oppression:* The rich tend to take charge, and their power intimidates and offends the poor.
- *Regarding Dissatisfaction:* Greed and materialism have no built-in safeguards or satisfying limits.
- *Regarding Frustration:* With an increased supply of money and possessions comes an accelerated number of people and worries.



Quotable

Without Christ at the very center of our lives, we cannot know fulfillment, contentment, and enjoyment.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Straight Talk to the Money-Mad

Ecclesiastes 5:8–20

2. “Grievous Evils” to Remember (Ecclesiastes 5:13–17)

As Solomon reflected on the insatiable appetite for wealth, He reminded us of two evils that a single-minded focus on riches can bring (Ecclesiastes 5:13–17):

- *Those who have clutched riches can quickly crash.* Our material possessions will not last forever, regardless of how well we manage them. We will either lose them because of an unforeseen tragedy, or we will leave them behind when we pass away.
- *Those who have lived high often die hard.* The materialist who lives in earthly opulence quickly discovers that money can’t buy happiness, contentment, or peace. In fact, the insatiable drive for wealth usually fills his or her life with futility, resentment, and pain.



A CLOSER LOOK

Is Money the Root of All Evil?

One of the most popular misquotes of Scripture is, “Money is the root of all evil.” An improved—though still deficient—version is, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” You may have heard 1 Timothy 6:10 quoted this way, or you may have quoted it this way yourself.

In the original Greek sentence, the word *rhiza*, “root,” actually comes first for emphasis. Also, the word “all,” *pas*, often means “all kinds” or varieties (Matthew 23:27; 1 Corinthians 6:18).¹ So, although the love of money is not the only source of all evil in the world, it’s a major source of all kinds of evil.

What does Paul mean when he says the love of money leads to various types of evil? Just as a weed sends strong roots into your garden soil, choking out flowers and vegetables, the love of riches strangles contentment from our lives. As we examine the problems of sin and evil in society and in our own lives, we will discover that many of our problems are vicious weeds sprouting forth from that single root of greed.



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Straight Talk to the Money-Mad

Ecclesiastes 5:8–20



LET'S LIVE IT

In Ecclesiastes 5:18–20, Solomon shared the right perspective on money, possessions, and work: they are God's gifts to be enjoyed, not worshiped. Therefore, there are three "good and fitting" gifts from God to claim:

- First, claim the gift of enjoyment in your life. This is a God-given possibility. Refuse to allow yourself to go in reverse, becoming a grim and negative individual, bound by bitterness and a victim of resentment.
- Second, claim the gift of fulfillment in your work. God is the One who gives riches and wealth, so invest your riches in His work by giving generously; invest your time for His glory; and invest your energy for His purpose.
- Third, claim the gift of contentment in your heart. Whether money comes or goes, Christians must seek contentment in the Lord.

Without Christ at the center of our lives, wealth leads only to disillusionment and dissatisfaction. Are you expending your energy to obtain wealth? Or are you enjoying your job and resources as God's gifts to you?

ENDNOTE

1. Walter Bauer and others, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 784.



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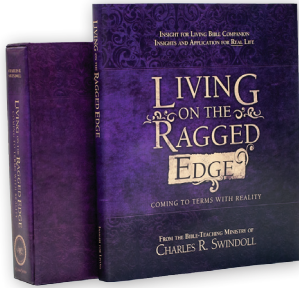
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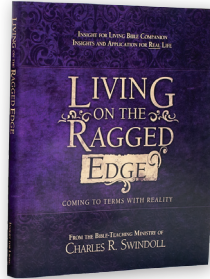
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

The Few Years of a Futile Life
Ecclesiastes 6



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In our previous message, we gave serious consideration to the subject of money. We realized again that material things cannot satisfy; neither can an abundance of money. Those things are unable to provide some of our most essential needs: security, happiness, satisfaction, and contentment. The chapter we are looking at in this message builds on all those thoughts by carrying the subject to its logical conclusion. These twelve verses frame a painfully realistic portrait . . . another in a long line of “under-the-sun” scenes. It’s the tragic picture of a man, old and weary, who has come to the sunset years of his life. Long shadows fall across his memory as he stares out the window on his past. As we shall discover, the word-painting could be called simply *futility*.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Some Shadowy Snapshots of Life

Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes are like a gallery of snapshots depicting life “under the sun”; however, the portrait we find in chapter 6 is painted in dark, drab colors that communicate inner turmoil, conflict, and pain. As we examine its description more closely, we’ll realize it’s a self-portrait of a disillusioned monarch. This moment of Solomon’s introspection may be troubling, for it will force us to examine our own lives, both in the dim light of the world under the sun and in the bright illumination of God’s perfect revelation.



Quotable

*Hard work doesn't
bring relief from
depression if
there are conflicts
that feed the soul
discouragement.*

*Only God
offers hope.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Few Years of a Futile Life

Ecclesiastes 6

2. An Enlargement of One Particular Portrait (Ecclesiastes 6:1–12)

Solomon zooms in and focuses on the condition prevalent among those who try to find satisfaction apart from God: when God gives these individuals riches, wealth, and honor, God also prevents them from enjoying the benefits of their riches, wealth, and honor. But why? Many “under-the-sun” thinkers would call this a cruel irony, an unfair twist. But Solomon reminds us:

- God is sovereign. He is the eternal creator and sustainer of every living thing.
- Man is *not* sovereign. We are finite, limited in strength, sinful, and irresponsible.
- Disputing God’s sovereignty is a waste of time and effort. We must accept God’s rule in our lives.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Who Will Enjoy Your Wealth?

Although most instances of the Hebrew word *nakheriy* refer to literal foreigners from another nation (1 Kings 11:1, 8; Ezra 10:2), in Wisdom literature it can sometimes have a figurative meaning: one who is like a “foreigner” or “stranger” (Job 19:15; Proverbs 2:16; 5:10).¹ In Ecclesiastes 6:2, the foreigner who benefits from another’s wealth comes from a different family.



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Few Years of a Futile Life
Ecclesiastes 6



LET'S LIVE IT

Our greatest need is not to study more about Solomon but to take a look inside our hearts and ask:

- *Does your life today seem futile?* More than likely, it does to all of us at times. And when we become frustrated, bewildered, and discontent, we often dispute with God rather than acknowledge our utter ignorance compared to His infinite wisdom.
- *Does your future seem fearful?* None of us knows what our future holds or what will come after we've gone. The very fact that our best laid plans frequently have to be revised is ample proof of this. However, Christ has assured us that if we build our lives on Him, then whenever the inevitable storms of life come, we will stand (Matthew 7:24–27).

In the midst of futility and frustration, does it help you to know that your life, though short, plays a part in God's unfolding plan? In response to this truth, are there circumstances or attitudes you need to specifically turn over to God in faith?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 648–49.



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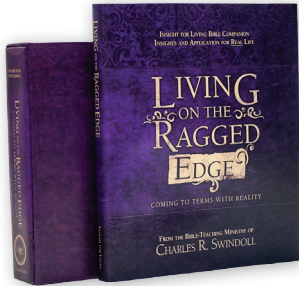
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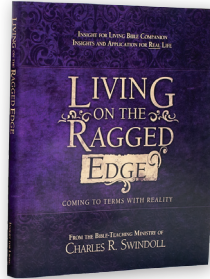
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Wise Words for Busy People
Ecclesiastes 7:1–14



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We've reached the halfway point in Solomon's journal. By now we have a pretty good handle on the man's mental perspective as well as his method of pursuit. But something has been conspicuous by its absence—wisdom. This comes as a surprise because Solomon had considerable, God-given wisdom. That's true except for a strange period in his life when he tossed restraint to the wind and acted out a role altogether unusual for a man of his heritage, his position, and his stature.

Had Solomon lived in our generation, perhaps we would explain his escapades as the result of a midlife crisis. Things that were once important and dear to him, he began to view with cynicism, especially the simplicity and purity of a walk of faith. Wisdom took a back seat as rebellion took control, grabbed the steering wheel, and jammed the accelerator to the floor! And even though lasting satisfaction eluded him, he kept taking every corner on two wheels. Funny thing about us humans—we tend to speed faster when we have lost our way. And when we do, wisdom steps back and waits, refusing to keep pace with our frantic, maddening race to find happiness.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Brief Review and Preview

- *What's behind us?* In the first six chapters in his journal on life, Solomon recorded his maddening search for meaning and purpose “under the sun.” But he found only futility and emptiness in his life apart from God.
- *What's ahead?* In chapters 7–12, Solomon's focus shifted from the grinding, dreary futility of life without God to an awareness that wisdom *must* take over if we hope to find meaning in life.

2. Counsel for Those in the Crunch (Ecclesiastes 7:1–14)

In Ecclesiastes 7:1–10, Solomon set forth seven comparative proverbs that illustrate for us things in life that are “better than” others. Here are a few that demonstrate Solomon's wisdom:



Quotable

*We dare not
make one major
decision without
asking for
the wisdom of God.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Wise Words for Busy People

Ecclesiastes 7:1–14

- An excellent reputation and integrity are better than the adornment of perfume (Ecclesiastes 7:1).
- A stroll through the graveyard is better than an afternoon at a buffet, because when we view life from the vantage point of the end, we gain insight about true significance (7:2).
- Sorrow is better than laughter, because it causes us to think about life's purpose (7:3–4).

In Ecclesiastes 7:11–14, Solomon explained the greatness of God's wisdom:

- Wisdom preserves us from the human pitfalls of pride, doubt, and disillusionment.
- Wisdom provides our lives with divine perspective.



A CLOSER LOOK

Proverbs

A *proverb* has been described as “a pithy saying, especially one condensing the wisdom of experience.”¹ It's a brief, practical generalization of truth that helps us approach life wisely—a “sound bite” of wisdom for living. We must remember, however, that Hebrew proverbs are meant to be general truths, not necessarily promises. Proverbs, like most Hebrew poetry, are characterized by parallelism,² of which the three most common types are summarized below:

Type of Parallelism	Description	Key Words	Examples
Contrastive	Second line contrasts with the first	<i>but;</i> <i>nevertheless</i>	Proverbs 13:1, 10
Completive	Second line completes the first	<i>and;</i> <i>so</i>	Proverbs 14:10, 13
Comparative	Second line compared with the first	<i>better . . . than;</i> <i>like/as. . . so</i>	Proverbs 25:24, 25



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Wise Words for Busy People
Ecclesiastes 7:1–14



LET'S LIVE IT

In light of Solomon's words of wisdom, there are two thoughts we need to ponder. In a busy world like ours where decisions are made at a moment's notice and often without reflection, we need to keep in mind:

- *Regarding decisions:* We dare not make a major decision without asking for wisdom from God.
- *Regarding perspective:* We cannot see the whole picture without drawing on God's wisdom.

Where do you turn first when you face a problem? When you ask God for wisdom, do you patiently wait for it, or do you forge ahead, relying on your own knowledge?

ENDNOTES

1. D. A. Hubbard, "Proverb," in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed., ed. J. D. Douglas and others (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1987), 988.
2. Nicholas H. Ridderbos and Herbert M. Wolf, "Poetry, Hebrew," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, K–P, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 892–94.



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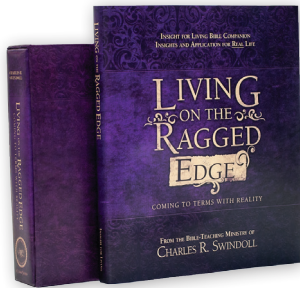
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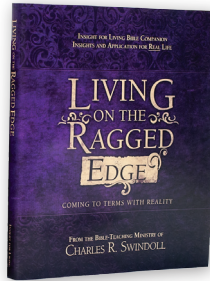
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Putting Wisdom to Work

Ecclesiastes 7:15–29



LET'S BEGIN HERE

By the second half of Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon started to get a little better perspective on life. As a result, his counsel took on a whole new style. The dark clouds of despair and hopelessness broke, thanks to the hope that wisdom brought. Instead of cold, sarcastic cynicism, Solomon's words evidenced a greater depth of caring, understanding, and insight. In the seventh chapter, each verse drips with rich and rare wisdom . . . the kind of counsel we get so little of in our world of human advice. But the writer's desire was not that we simply extol the virtues of wisdom and stand in awe of it, but that we *put it to work*. What good is wisdom on the shelf of theory? Who needs it if it can't benefit everyday life? Ecclesiastes 7:15–29 will help us see wisdom's practical usefulness.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. An Analysis of Wisdom

Solomon's perspective was rather dim in the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes when he examined the futility of life without God at the center. However, in Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon began to use the wisdom he had gleaned from his exploration of the world. We'll see Solomon's perspective come into even clearer focus in his description of the outworking of wisdom to produce balance and stability in life.



Quotable

*God holds
everything in His
hands—including
yesterday's failures,
today's challenges,
and tomorrow's
surprises.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Putting Wisdom to Work

Ecclesiastes 7:15–29

2. The Outworking of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:15–29)

When God's people put His wisdom into action, we will experience three benefits: balance, strength, and insight.

- *Balance:* Wisdom guards us from the extremes of an overly zealous, “super-pious” attitude, and it helps us to live with authenticity.
- *Strength:* Wisdom helps us accept painful tensions, restrains us from gullibility, and enables us to resist criticism.
- *Insight:* Only God can make us wise. Wisdom teaches us that our most basic battle is not with God but with ourselves.



A CLOSER LOOK

God's Timing versus Ours

We Christians believe that God knows the length of our days. And because He knows the future perfectly, the time of our death is set on His calendar, even though we may fill our own calendars for years beyond that date. So what did Solomon mean in Ecclesiastes 7:17 when he said, “Why should you die before your time?” Can we change the time of our death and the future God already knows? Wouldn't that thwart His plan or at least catch Him by surprise? Does God's plan and knowledge of the future change based on our decisions?

While there is room within conservative theism for various perspectives on the tension between the sovereignty of God and the human will, we must conclude that because God knows not only all possible futures but also the future that will actually unfold, then each of us has a date and time when our lives will end. No matter what we do, we can't thwart God's plan or nullify His perfect knowledge.

So what do Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 7:17 mean? Even though God's plan includes knowledge of the end of our lives, He wants people to live wise, godly lives that are long and rich. By fearing God and keeping His commands, people can generally avoid things that shorten their lives and can continue to live long, fruitful lives. But by living foolishly in unrighteousness, we can shorten the normal lifespan and fail to experience God's blessings. Thus, from the human perspective, you can “die before your time,” but from God's eternal perspective, He's not surprised by such a premature death.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Putting Wisdom to Work
Ecclesiastes 7:15–29



LET'S LIVE IT

Wisdom is not merely a theoretical concept to be written about and stored on our shelves to collect dust. Neither is it simply the result of our own ingenuity, education, and experience. The Lord gives us wisdom so we can view life with objectivity and handle it with stability. Those of us who have already placed our faith in Christ alone for forgiveness have access to that wisdom from God through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Here is a helpful checklist to evaluate whether or not you are living with wisdom:

- *Regarding balance:* Is wisdom guarding you from extremes?
- *Regarding strength:* Is wisdom keeping you stable?
- *Regarding insight:* Is wisdom clearing your mind?



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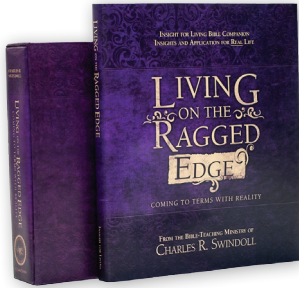
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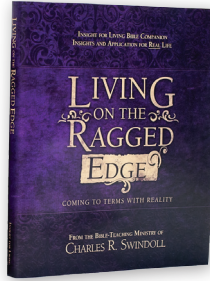
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

The Qualities of a Good Boss

Ecclesiastes 8:1–9



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Wisdom. This one word describes the theme of the second half of Solomon's memoirs in the book of Ecclesiastes. The terms *wise* and *wisdom* appear more than thirty times in the last six chapters, and the concept is interwoven through most of the paragraphs . . . sometimes in a subtle manner, other times boldly. In the previous message, we discovered some of the benefits that come our way when we operate our lives according to wisdom: balance, strength, and insight. In today's exposition, we'll see these benefits personified in the life of "the wise man," portrayed by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 8:1–9. Obviously, this individual is in command, having authority over others . . . hence, we can apply the passage to today's CEO or anyone who exercises authority over others.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Brief Explanation of the Structure

While the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes record Solomon's exploration and observations of the futility of life under the sun, chapter 7 contains a series of proverbial principles based on his conclusions. In chapter 8, Solomon painted for us a picture of those principles personified, and in this particular instance, he illustrated the traits of a wise leader.



Quotable

*A good leader
keeps a cheerful
disposition. There
are few things more
contagious — and
rare — than a
cheerful boss.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Qualities of a Good Boss

Ecclesiastes 8:1–9

2. Clear Description of the Leader (Ecclesiastes 8:1–9)

Although Solomon viewed the king's rule from the perspective of those he was ruling, it is precisely this point of view that good leaders need. Solomon focused on five qualities of a good boss.

- *A clear mind.* Good leaders know where they are philosophically and theologically. They don't just follow the trendy, pragmatic, action-oriented approach to leadership.
- *A cheerful face.* When leaders are happy and positive, this can rub off on their followers. When bosses are negative and critical, those below them will reflect this same mentality.
- *A discreet mouth.* Leaders who exercise authority with tact, diplomacy, sensitivity, and compassion will generally receive the benefit of a supportive and loyal staff.
- *Keen judgment.* Good leaders acknowledge God's sovereignty, can map out and execute a successful plan, remain stable under pressure, and act on their intuition.
- *A humble spirit.* Good bosses depend on God to accomplish their tasks, and they draw on the strengths of those under them, giving the individuals they manage a sense of importance and dignity.

Solomon also gave two practical warnings that bosses must keep in mind.

- It is inexcusable to take unfair advantage.
- If you do, you'll be hurt more than anyone else.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Solomon's Solution to Life's Problems

The word translated “interpretation” in Ecclesiastes 8:1 is the Hebrew word *peshet*, which means “solution.”¹ Solomon's God-given wisdom gave him not only insight into the “under-the-sun” problems that face human beings but the ability to look beyond the sun, to God, to find solutions. *Peshet* is also used in Daniel some thirty times with reference to the interpretation of dreams (Daniel 2:4). Therefore, it refers to the hidden, secret, or not-so-obvious explanation of something.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

The Qualities of a Good Boss
Ecclesiastes 8:1–9



LET'S LIVE IT

Now it's time to personally appropriate these principles by understanding:

- *The value of being a model:* Our example outlives our achievements.
- *The vision of seeing a cycle:* Our followers may one day outstrip our influence.

How do you want those you have led to describe your impact on their lives? What can you do today to begin building this legacy?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 833.



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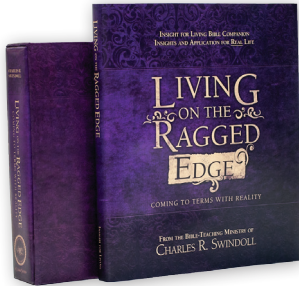
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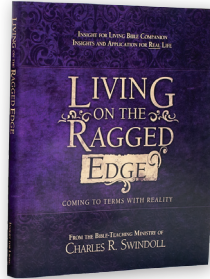
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Mysteries That Defy Explanation

Ecclesiastes 8:10–17



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Just in case you haven't noticed, God operates in the realm of mystery. His wisdom is not based on human logic or human knowledge. When we forget that other-worldly nature of God's wisdom, frankly, we're headed for trouble. As we have learned in previous messages, we cannot get God's wisdom through academic pursuit. We can't go to school and earn a degree in God's wisdom. Our God is profoundly deep and mysterious, and His thoughts and ways are far beyond our ability to comprehend.

Not only do we scratch our heads at God's ways, our lives take mysterious turns now and then. In this segment of Solomon's journal, Ecclesiastes 8:10–17, we will learn about three rather familiar mysteries: unjust triumph, unfair consequences, and untimely pleasure.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Random Thoughts about Mysteries

Life is mysterious. The mysteries of the universe attract the curiosity and excitement of scientists, and each new discovery forces them to reexamine their earlier conclusions. There are other mysteries people do *not* get excited about—mysteries that produce nagging questions such as: Why did I develop this incurable disease? Why isn't marriage counseling working? Why did my child die? Why does evil so often seem to triumph over good? These mysteries can cause us to question the goodness and sovereignty of God.

The Bible also contains numerous mysteries: the mystery of the kingdom (Mark 4); the mystery of Israel (Romans 11); the mystery of resurrection (1 Corinthians 15); the mystery of God's will (Ephesians 1); the mystery of the church (Ephesians 3); the mystery of marriage (Ephesians 5); the mystery of the gospel (Ephesians 6); the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2); and the mystery of godliness (1 Timothy 3).



Quotable

If God allows a mystery into your life, don't doubt or wonder if He's good. Let it inspire worship, not disbelief.

—Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Mysteries That Defy Explanation

Ecclesiastes 8:10–17

2. Solomon's Additional Mysteries (Ecclesiastes 8:10–17)

To get the most out of our study of Ecclesiastes 8:10–17, let's flip to the end and see how all the pieces of the puzzle will eventually fit together. Ecclesiastes 8:16–17 gives us a twofold outlook on divine mysteries that will put our thoughts in proper perspective:

- *God's mysteries defy human discovery:* No matter how hard we try in our own human strength, we can't explain the infinite workings of God.
- *God's mysteries go beyond human wisdom:* Not only can we not explain what God is doing, but we lack the intellect to even grasp it. If God wants us to know even part of His infinite mind, He must reveal it to us by His Spirit.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Our Mysterious God

Our English word *mystery* comes from the Greek *musterion*. In the New Testament, the word refers to the thoughts and plans of God that are hidden from humanity and must be made known by divine revelation.¹ In the Old Testament, the word *raz* corresponds to *musterion* and appears only in Daniel.² *Raz* usually refers to dreams or secrets about things that must be revealed by God. Daniel said to King Nebuchadnezzar, regarding the interpretation of his dream, “As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (Daniel 2:27–28).



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Mysteries That Defy Explanation

Ecclesiastes 8:10–17



LET'S LIVE IT

Solomon gave us several truths that will help us handle the mysterious nature of life:

- I am only human—limited and weak.
- I do not understand why.
- I am not able to bring about change.
- God alone can do the impossible and provide answers, but not until He is ready.
- I must wait on God and deliberately adopt a lifestyle of contentment and joy.

How would you communicate these important truths to young believers struggling with the tough questions of God's goodness and sovereignty? Do you believe these statements?

ENDNOTES

1. Walter Bauer and others, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 661–62.
2. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 1112.



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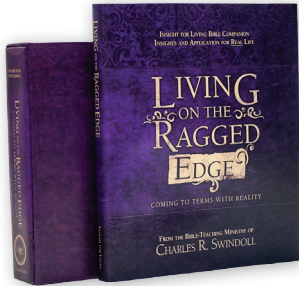
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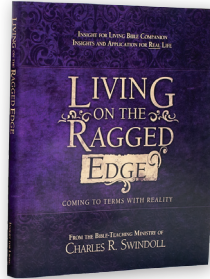
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Have a Blast While You Last!
Ecclesiastes 9:1–10



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Solomon pulled out all the stops in this section of his journal. With bold strokes of his pen, he declared some of the inevitable, inescapable realities in life. Solomon hammered away at man-made philosophies of life that had failed to provide meaning and fulfillment. Following such brash assertions, he turned to the reader and offered counsel on how to conduct his or her life. In chapter 9, Solomon argued that human beings must accept God's sovereignty and find meaning in relationship with Him. And keeping in mind God's sovereignty and the finite nature of our lives, we must live life to its fullest, making the best of every moment of every day. We may resist the writer's go-for-broke attitude in verses 7–10, but we are hard pressed to offer a better plan, especially in light of the certainty of death and the evil so prevalent in our world. See if you don't agree that this section, though direct and bold, is very much in tune with life today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Familiar Philosophies of Life

Throughout his journal, Solomon blasted away at the bedrock of these man-made philosophies of life, because they fail to provide meaning and fulfillment:

- *Materialism*: Possessions satisfy, so provide for yourself!
- *Epicureanism*: Life is a ball, so enjoy yourself!
- *Humanism*: Humanity is glorious, so exalt yourself!
- *Fatalism*: The game is fixed, so resign yourself!



Quotable

*Nothing touches
your life that hasn't
passed through
the hand of God,
either directed or
permitted.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Have a Blast While You Last!
Ecclesiastes 9:1–10

2. Biblical Philosophy on Living (Ecclesiastes 9:1–10)

After breaking down the false philosophies of life, Solomon built up a God-focused life by explaining:

- *Inescapable and inevitable realities:* First, we must accept the sovereign work of God, the absolute certainty of death, that a mixture of evil and insanity resides in the human heart, and that there is hope for the living.
- *How to respond to such realities:* Solomon then exhorted believers to live happily wherever we are, to walk in purity and in the power of the Spirit, to give ourselves completely to our spouse, and to throw ourselves fully into all of life.



LET'S LIVE IT

Solomon instructed us to do whatever we do in this life with vim and vigor (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Based on this biblical philosophy of life, we should live free of guilt, contagiously happy, committed to God, and thoroughly involved in life! Don't wait until you retire to start enjoying life. How do you know you'll make it that long? If you were to die today, would your family be left with memories or just money?

We need to actively pursue the good gifts God has given us. To neglect His gifts or to pick at them delicately may show a lack of appreciation to the Giver. As we partake in God's blessings, however, we must always remember to do all things to the glory of God and in fear of Him (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17, 23). Wise living balances an enjoyment of the gifts with a love for the Giver, never forgetting that "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things" (Romans 11:36).



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Have a Blast While You Last!

Ecclesiastes 9:1–10

In the following chart, evaluate your personal application of these four responses to life, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest.

I live joyfully wherever I am.	1	2	3	4	5
I walk in wisdom and purity by the Spirit.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy life with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
I embrace God's gifts to the fullest.	1	2	3	4	5

Based on your ratings, which response needs the most work?

What specific thing can you do today to begin applying at least one of these four principles?



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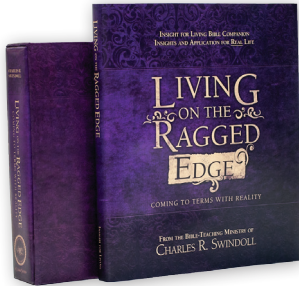
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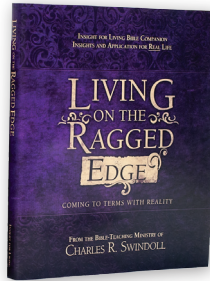
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

An Objective View of the Rat Race

Ecclesiastes 9:11–18



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We all need an objective view of the rat race we live in! Many of our lives can be summed up in three words: *hurry*, *worry*, and *bury*. Thankfully, Solomon's ancient journal that God has preserved as the book of Ecclesiastes tells us to come to terms with reality and, with God's help, enjoy life! This God-inspired book encourages us to squeeze every enjoyment out of life *now*, while we still have time!

So what words would sum up *your* life? Don't let someone else set your pace or establish your objective, or you will be woefully off target. If you feel like you're on the proverbial treadmill, beginning to resemble a mouse in a maze more than an intelligent human being en route to an admirable and challenging goal, here is a section of Scripture that invites us to pull out of the rat race and take an honest, studied look at life.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Various Ways to View Our Lives

As people are faced with living on the ragged edge, they often construct systems of coping with the chaos. These aren't philosophical approaches, such as humanism, nihilism, or materialism but more practical approaches to life that people often adopt without thinking. The problem with each of these is that they are self-centered, and they focus on our own strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and power. These coping strategies include optimism, pessimism, suspicion, and fatalism.



Quotable

*We tend to choose
the path of least
resistance and then
find experts who
help us rationalize
wrong. God's way
is always best.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

An Objective View of the Rat Race

Ecclesiastes 9:11–18

2. An “Under-the-Sun” Observation (Ecclesiastes 9:11–12)

At the close of chapter 9, Solomon warned his readers against the unending cycle of competing harder, running faster, getting up earlier, neglecting family and friends, and making our jobs a top priority.

- *The “race” as it’s being run:* If you’re in the rat race, speeding down the highway at full throttle, remember that God’s omnipotent hand still rules. He’s like a traffic cop forcing us to slow down when we’re headed for a spiritual wreck.
- *The end of it all:* Death is a reality, and sudden cataclysmic change is real. It does us no good to deny our own mortality or to challenge God’s sovereignty. We are only deceiving ourselves if we pretend to be immune to tragedy.



A CLOSER LOOK

God’s Above It All

At this point in his journey through the practical issues of life, Solomon stated his central thesis that God is God and we are not. Solomon asserted that God’s sovereign plan supersedes all our labor, gifts, and abilities (Ecclesiastes 9:11, 18). Because we can’t know His purposes (9:11–12), we ought to live our lives in quiet fear of God and in wisdom, regardless of what the outcome may be in this world (9:13–18).



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

An Objective View of the Rat Race

Ecclesiastes 9:11–18



LET'S LIVE IT

In Ecclesiastes 9:13–18, Solomon provided some “under-the-sun” wisdom to those who feel pressure to participate in the relentless drive for success:

- *Human ability cannot guarantee genuine success:* The competitive world tells Christians to keep our faith private. But God is God, and success ultimately comes from His hand.
- *Strength is more impressive, yet less effective, than wisdom:* Christians must turn to God’s Word to guide us in mundane decisions such as jobs or finances.
- *Wise counsel is never popular, rarely obeyed, and seldom remembered:* Be wise, seek God’s will, and walk by the Spirit, but don’t expect to be patted on the back.
- *Human rulers will always out-shout wise counselors, and fools prefer the former:* The rat race isn’t won by soft-spoken wisdom and godly counsel.
- *Constructive words of wisdom are no match for destructive weapons of war:* Only by quitting the rat race will we begin to experience success and satisfaction on God’s terms.

Do you feel like you’re on the proverbial treadmill, running frantically but getting nowhere? When will you get out of the rat race and seek *true* success?



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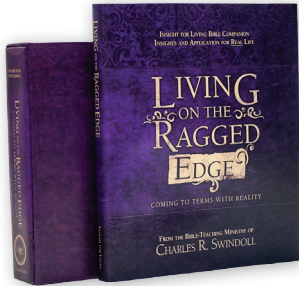
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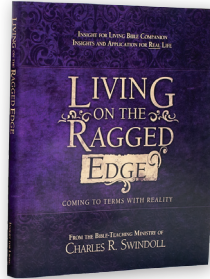
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Sensible!
Ecclesiastes 10:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes had completed his search for meaning in the endless halls of humanism. And he found nothing but futility, nothing that satisfies, and nothing of substance. With all that behind him, Solomon calmly and logically began to build a case for living life *wisely* instead of *foolishly*. If we didn't know better, we'd be tempted to think these verses had been lifted from the book of Proverbs. In this section of his journal, Solomon wrote in maxims, one loosely connected to the next, comprising a whole chapter of contrasts . . . wisdom versus folly, the sensible person as opposed to the fool. The writer said, in effect, "Be sensible as you face life in all its diversity and challenge."



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Review: Where We've Been (Ecclesiastes 1–9)

In the first nine chapters in his journal, Solomon assaulted the incorrect "under-the-sun" perspective on life—a life of self-sufficiency, emptiness, and purposelessness. Nearing the end of his search for meaning apart from God, Solomon realized that only futility could be found there. With the depths of futility now behind him and with a handful of practical principles gleaned from a realistic examination of everyday life under the sun, Solomon began to construct a philosophy of life based on this truth: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). Starting in chapter 10, a whole new world of wisdom and hope opens up.



Quotable

*Fools don't
listen. Fools
don't learn. You,
on the other hand,
can do both
with God's help.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Sensible!
Ecclesiastes 10:1–11

2. A Contrast: Wisdom and Folly (Ecclesiastes 10:1–11)

As a final warning concerning life under the sun, Ecclesiastes 10 transitions us into the two concluding chapters of the book. As such, Solomon contrasted wisdom and folly, associating folly with the futility of the world “under the sun” and wisdom with the proper “above-the-sun” perspective on earthly life.

- *Advantages versus disadvantages (Ecclesiastes 10:1–3):* A little folly can cast a dark shadow over a life otherwise characterized by wisdom and honor.
- *Humility and patience versus popularity and partiality (10:4–7):* If someone in authority loses his or her temper, the wise person should maintain composure.
- *Inevitable risks versus inexcusable stupidity (10:8–11):* We must take into consideration the potential consequences of our actions as we plan our course.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

True Biblical Wisdom

Two Greek adjectives translated “sensible” or “wise,” *phronimos* and *sophron*, describe a wisdom with both thoughtfulness and prudence.¹ The wise and sensible person hears and obeys Christ’s words (Matthew 7:24). Jesus instructed the disciples to be “shrewd [*phronimos*] as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16) and, in the parable of the ten virgins (25:1–13), to prepare themselves for the bridegroom’s coming. Likewise, leaders of the church and mature believers must display prudence and sensibility in their responsibilities (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; 2:2, 5). As we can see from these passages, being wise, prudent, and sensible are not merely Old Testament commandments but New Testament fruits of the life of faith.



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Sensible!
Ecclesiastes 10:1–11



LET'S LIVE IT

So how do we get wisdom? It takes more than prayer. According to Proverbs 2:1–11, we must dig into God's Word and live it out in the joyful, tragic, and mundane aspects of life. We must treasure God's Word, maintain a teachable spirit, keep a sensitive heart, pray always, and pursue wisdom with diligence.

If you are growing in wisdom, how has God been working in your life to cause this growth? How can you continue to foster these responses to God's revelation?

ENDNOTE

1. Walter Bauer and others, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 987, 1066.



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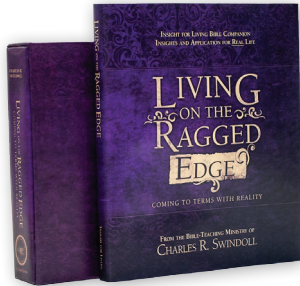
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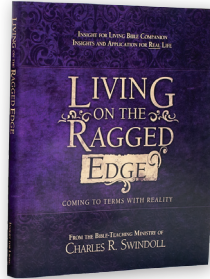
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

A Fool's Portrait
Ecclesiastes 10:12–20



LET'S BEGIN HERE

When Scripture paints a life, the Spirit of God never overlooks the blemishes, the scars, or any other imperfection. The Divine Artist does not flatter His subjects. Ecclesiastes 10 is a case in point. Having established indisputable evidence that wisdom is the only way to fly, Solomon placed folly and foolishness alongside wisdom to highlight the contrast. Fools do not listen or learn, and they cannot hide the truth from anyone. Fools are known as such by the public. While on the subject, Solomon went further into detail, supplying additional information about the characteristics of a fool. The painting is anything but enjoyable; nevertheless, it drips with realism. If we laughed at fools before, we see the tragic and dangerous side of them now.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Person Inside the Fool

A lot of images come to mind when we think of a fool—a mischievous prankster, a careless blunderer, or a lazy oaf who sits around all day. But Psalm 14:1 projects a different image of a fool: the person who believes there is no God to whom he or she is accountable. As a result, the fool commits sins against God and others.

The book of Proverbs reveals at least four characteristics of fools:

- They treat wickedness like a sport and find pleasure in committing sin (Proverbs 10:23).
- They habitually lie and can't tell the difference between truth and error (14:8).
- They mock sin and make light of wrongdoing (14:9).
- They rage against the Lord and blame Him for self-inflicted wounds (19:3).



Quotable

There's a person who says, "There is God and no accountability. I will live on my own." The Bible's name for this person? Fool.

—Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

A Fool's Portrait

Ecclesiastes 10:12–20

2. The External Actions of the Fool (Ecclesiastes 10:12–20)

What makes the fool tick is a sinful heart that has not yet been transformed by God's grace. Here are four ways fools manifest the internal folly of their hearts:

- *Destructive speech*: Fools multiply words to their own harm.
- *Unpredictable future*: Fools are ignorant of the fact that the future is not predictable.
- *Confusion and stupidity*: The fool is pictured as wandering around in the wilderness, unwilling to seek the Lord for assistance in finding the way.
- *Procrastination and poor judgment*: Fools lead careless, undisciplined lives and neglect the most important aspects of marriage, children, work, health, and spiritual needs.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

The Spirit of the Fool

The Hebrew word often translated “fool” in Ecclesiastes is *sakhal*, from a verb root that means to be foolish in a “moral or spiritual sense.”¹ In Psalms and Proverbs, the word used to describe the foolish is *nabal*, which means “the man who has no perception of ethical and religious claims.”² Being a fool in the biblical sense doesn't necessarily refer to a stupid, uneducated, or ignorant person, but indicates the lack of sense in spiritual and moral matters (Jeremiah 4:22; 5:21).



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

A Fool's Portrait
Ecclesiastes 10:12–20



LET'S LIVE IT

We all know fools. Here are some tips to help us deal with fools:

- If there is continued folly, isolation may be the most effective treatment.
- If there is true repentance and brokenness, restoration is appropriate.
- When there is restoration from folly, let there be proclamation.

Are you living as a fool by failing to submit to God's standard? If so, turn from your ways and ask God for wisdom.

Do you have fools in your life? If so, pray for them earnestly, and take the steps necessary to give God room to work in their lives.

ENDNOTES

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 698.
2. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 614.



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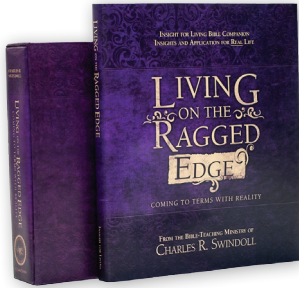
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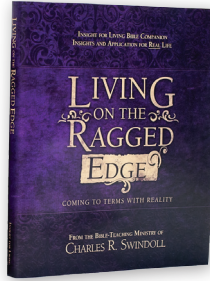
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Bullish!
Ecclesiastes 11:1–6



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Interestingly, the older we get the more cautious we become. With deliberate and careful concern, we study before we step, we ponder before we leap, we hesitate before we move out into the open. If we're not careful, we replace the risks of faith with a methodical, almost tedious lifestyle that borders on boredom. But is that what God wants of us? Must growing old be synonymous with an overly cautious mentality? Not if we take to heart these first six verses in Ecclesiastes 11! You may be surprised to discover that the God of Scripture condones what would be called today a "bullish" approach to living . . . a bold, aggressive investment of our lives that has eternal value. Perhaps the best way to paraphrase these verses would be the five-word command, "Stop existing, and start living!"



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Common Counsel for the Aging

All too often, the aging are advised to adopt a lifeless lifestyle—to stop exerting themselves, to take it easy, avoid risks, and live cautiously. Most of the stereotypical lifestyles we're expected to adopt, or the common counsel we're expected to follow, are not supported by Scripture. While life undoubtedly changes as we age, many of the changes reflect our attitudes, not our physical condition. Aging is a fact. But this doesn't mean we need to stop pursuing life with the passion of youth.



Quotable

*Don't wait for
conditions to be
free of all risks and
absolutely safe.
They never will be.
Trust God and live
to the fullest!*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Bullish!

Ecclesiastes 11:1–6

2. God's Uncommon Advice for All (Ecclesiastes 11:1–6)

The last two major sections of Solomon's journal can be summed up in three commands: Be bold! Be joyful! Be godly! When we pursue these directives, our lives will transform from boring into exciting and contagious—regardless of whether we're young, middle-aged, or elderly. Solomon exhorted people of all ages to adopt a bold lifestyle, to maintain a healthy fear of God, and not to fear uncontrollable circumstances. Solomon gave us four instructions:

- *Instead of protecting, release yourself.*
- *Rather than hoarding, give and invest.*
- *In place of drifting, pursue.*
- *As an alternative to doubting, courageously trust.*



A CLOSER LOOK

Road Map for the Journey

As Solomon paved the way to a bold, faith-filled life, he reflected on the whole of life in the most profound and practical terms. In the beginning of Ecclesiastes 11, Solomon explained:

- God is in control of life's events, and we don't know what will come (Ecclesiastes 11:2, 5).
- We must not fear the uncertainties of life but trust the Lord (11:3–4).
- We should work and plan for the future in light of God's sovereignty (11:1–2).



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Be Bullish!
Ecclesiastes 11:1–6



LET'S LIVE IT

As we wrap up our study of this section from Solomon's ancient journal, let's consider three challenges that can help us become more bullish and less timid in our approach to life:

- *Start living it up today and never quit.* Let's invest in someone else, volunteer our services, and refuse to allow our lives to collect dust.
- *Remember that wisdom must accompany action.* We shouldn't let the extremes of fear or foolish impulses dictate our decisions. We must live with discernment and balance.
- *Watch out for enemy attacks during lulls in the action.* Remembering this will help keep us from giving in to mediocrity and will motivate us to press on with enthusiasm.

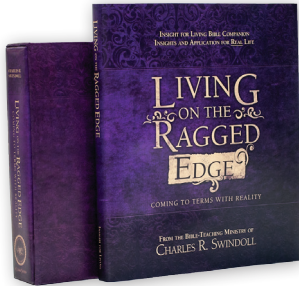
Are there activities you've been avoiding due to fear of unknown results? Are there things you would like to try but are intimidated by the "mights" and "what-ifs"? If so, what is the worst that could happen if you stepped out in faith and just did something with boldness?



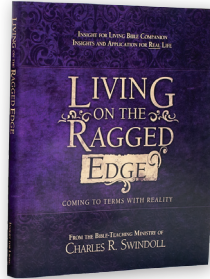
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Enjoying Life Now, Not Later
Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Many people make the mistake of indefinitely putting off the enjoyment of life, almost as if the pleasure of living is something to be done once people are up in years. They spend their energy and time building toward some distant day when they can sit back, relax, smile on life, and finally enjoy it. But nowhere does Scripture urge us to embrace such a philosophy and certainly not in this ancient book of realism and wisdom named Ecclesiastes. In this section especially, Solomon repeatedly exhorts us to rejoice *now*, not later—during childhood and adolescence as well as adulthood and our twilight years. This disconnects true happiness, by the way, from material possessions, emotional maturity, and financial security. In Ecclesiastes 12:1, we find the secret to true joy in life. Joy is inseparably linked to living in daily relationship with God and trusting in the plan of our wise Creator.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Enjoying Life: What Are You Waiting For?

When asked, “Why are you waiting to enjoy life?” people usually respond in three ways. Some would say, “I’ll be happy when I have all the things I’ve ever wanted.” Others may reply, “When I meet the person who will fulfill my life, I will have joy.” A third answer might be, “When I have achieved my goals and realized my dreams, then I will really enjoy my life.” These may represent common responses, but the Bible has something different to say about finding joy.



Quotable

*If you're waiting
for something or
someone to bring
you happiness,
you're in for a
lifetime of waiting.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Enjoying Life Now, Not Later
Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1

2. Enjoying Life: What Does God Say about It? (Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1)

Solomon linked joy in life, not to our material possessions, personal relationships, or ambitious pursuits but to our relationship with God. When we learn to walk with God each day, we will develop contentment with the simple things He has graciously given us, such as:

- *God gives us the okay to enjoy life.*
- *God removes the traditional limitations.*
- *God inserts enough warnings to keep us realistic.*
- *God reminds us of one essential ingredient.*



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Anger Under the Sun

The Hebrew word translated “anger” in Ecclesiastes 11:10 is *kha’as* and refers to the kinds of anger and resentment that come from undeserved treatment.¹ This kind of anger flares up in response to external conditions outside our control. Solomon used *kha’as* several times in Ecclesiastes to indicate the frustration that people feel when they realize the futility of life (Ecclesiastes 1:18; 2:23). However, the feeling can cause a person to look beyond the sun to the profundity of life from God (7:3). Ultimately, such feelings of anger and resentment should be exchanged for wisdom and contentment (7:9).



LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Enjoying Life Now, Not Later
Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1



LET'S LIVE IT

If God has given us the okay to enjoy life, what hinders our pursuit of happiness?

- First, *self-appointed excuses keep us from claiming daily joy*. These are the “if-onlys” of life. We don’t have to wait for our circumstances to change. We can find pleasure in our lives right now by turning to God alone for contentment that rises above the ragged edge of life (Philippians 4:11–13).
- Second, *self-styled independence keeps us from remembering our Creator*. This is the “it’s all about me” and “I’ll make it on my own” perspective of life. This prideful, self-centered attitude robs people of joy because it keeps us from relying on the only One who can give us lasting joy—our loving God.

What is one thing you could have done today to enjoy the good things in life given by God? Why didn’t you do it? What will you do tomorrow to enjoy life?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 495.



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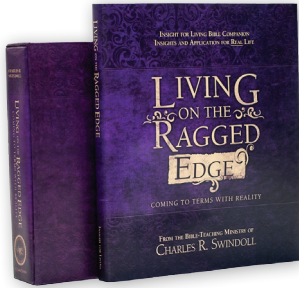
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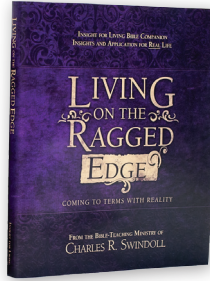
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Gray Hairs, Fewer Teeth, Yet a Big Smile
Ecclesiastes 12:1–8



LET'S BEGIN HERE

This ancient journal has taken us from the energetic vitality of youth, through the disillusionment and cynicism of middle age, and now right up to the grave. We have entered into the writer's struggles, we have felt the sting of his frustrations, we have nodded in agreement with many of his cries of exasperation, and now we sigh alongside Solomon as he describes the reality of growing older. But let's not miss his point! Solomon stated his thesis at the beginning (Ecclesiastes 12:1) and at the end (12:6) of this very eloquent paragraph. Because all of us will "return to the earth" and because our spirit "will return to God who gave it" (12:7), *now* is the time to "remember Him" in all our ways.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Traditional Feelings among the Aging

Before we jump into studying Solomon's divine perspective on growing old, it will be helpful to survey some common feelings about aging in our culture. A life lived without a relationship with God and trust in His sovereignty can result in some pessimistic views on aging.

- *Uselessness*: "I'm in the way. I'm over the hill and don't have much to contribute."
- *Guilt*: "I blew it and fouled up my life."
- *Self-Pity*: "I have been given a raw deal in life."
- *Fear*: "I'm so afraid . . . of getting sick, being alone, dying."



Quotable

*You may feel like
you've fouled
up your life. I
don't believe God
is done with you.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Gray Hairs, Fewer Teeth, Yet a Big Smile

Ecclesiastes 12:1–8

2. Scriptural Realities Worth Considering (Ecclesiastes 12:1–8)

In this section on aging, Solomon argued that because life apart from God amounts to vanity (Ecclesiastes 12:8), we should remember God all our days and enjoy life as His gift (12:1–7). Don't wait until it's too late to remember and obey Him—do it now! Solomon wrote about how to prepare for old age.

- *What to Do Before the Fact:* We must remember our Creator—we must keep God at the forefront of our minds so His will affects our attitudes and actions.
- *Some Inevitable Issues All Must Face:* Before we reach our final years, we will face physical and mental deterioration. So let's worship God with all our faculties now.
- *Life's Final Factor:* Unless the Lord returns, every one of us will die. After this, there will be no opportunity to serve God, enjoy His good gifts, or build a relationship with Him.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

The Act of Remembering

The verb “remember” in Ecclesiastes 12:1 is the Hebrew word *zakhar*. While “remember” in English is almost completely a mental exercise, *zakhar* often emphasizes the God-focused action that results from a person's reflection on God's works and ways.¹ Remembering our Creator means more than just thinking about Him now and then. It means keeping Him at the forefront of our thoughts and affections so His character influences our attitudes and actions.



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Gray Hairs, Fewer Teeth, Yet a Big Smile
Ecclesiastes 12:1–8



LET'S LIVE IT

Woven between the lines of some of Solomon's final words, we can find some practical truths for people in all stages of life. If we accept the reality that we will grow old, we can walk confidently with the Lord down the path of aging. We must admit:

- *"I am not getting any younger."*
- *"God has designed me to be empty without Him."*
- *"Now is the time to prepare for eternity."*

If people were to observe you throughout this day, would they conclude that you're remembering your Creator? What evidence could they point to in order to support their observation?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 269–70.



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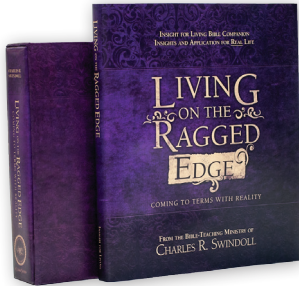
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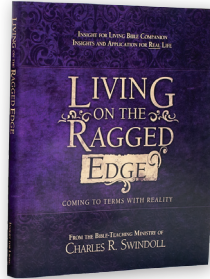
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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: Coming to Terms with Reality

Wrapping Up a Ragged-Edge Journey

Ecclesiastes 12:8–14



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Solomon's pilgrimage was quite a journey from the depths of despair through the slough of despond to the ragged edge of disillusionment. Caught in the jaws of his horizontal perspective, the man screamed his skepticism across life's landscape. He did not mince words as he declared his feelings about humanistic, empty philosophy: *vanity of vanities, all is vanity!* His key phrase, repeated numerous times, was "under the sun." But as he approached the end of the journey, a light started to shine. Hope emerged. Doubt dissolved. And Solomon exhorted the reader to *remember your Creator while you are still young*. Once God came back into view, Solomon's whole perspective changed. In fact, the Preacher started sounding like a preacher again! Relief returned as Solomon closed his journal. With the prodigal back in the pulpit, and with his heart and soul focused "above the sun," we can receive Solomon's wisdom and apply it to our lives.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Viewing the Book as a Sermon

In his sermon, Solomon never left us in doubt about the major proposition he expounded and defended: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Solomon then developed his central thesis by giving numerous examples of the empty life apart from God. He argued that if life has no purpose or meaning, then what are we doing here? Why go on living at all? Then the Preacher finally came full circle to his original question: How can we find meaning and joy under the sun? This time Solomon explained that we can only find joy in life by looking to our Creator and by obeying Him all the days of our lives (12:1, 13).



Quotable

*Solomon says that
the end of life is
to guide our steps
today. Take
steps with the
end in mind.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE:

Coming to Terms with Reality

Wrapping Up a Ragged-Edge Journey

Ecclesiastes 12:8–14

2. Hearing the Conclusion of the Sermon (Ecclesiastes 12:8–14)

The closing seven verses of Solomon's sermon fall neatly into two sections. In the first section (Ecclesiastes 12:8–12), Solomon identified himself as the Preacher, the one whom God had endowed with supernatural wisdom. He ministered the Word of God with clever illustrations so God's wisdom could penetrate lives with clear and powerful principles. And in the second section (12:13–14), Solomon concluded his sermon with a practical challenge that applies to everyone: fear God and obey His Word.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Goads and Nails of Wisdom

Solomon used two items from the ancient world to illustrate the power of a teacher's wise words to a student. First, he compared the words of wise men to "goads" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). These long sticks have a sharp spike on one end to prod oxen along as they plow a field. On the other end is a small shovel-like tool used to remove built-up dirt from the plow itself.¹ Wise words prick the conscience and prod the hearer to righteousness and fear of the Lord (Acts 26:14). They also clean away the folly and sin that prevent us from moving in a straight line.

In another simile, Solomon likened those who have mastered the teaching of wisdom to "well-driven nails" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Godly wisdom, which is fixed and immovable, provides stability in life. While the storms of life will overcome fools, wise God-fearers will be well-anchored.



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Coming to Terms with Reality

Wrapping Up a Ragged-Edge Journey

Ecclesiastes 12:8–14



LET'S LIVE IT

Though Solomon's search for meaning and joy in life has ended, ours has only begun. Remember: God is the answer to our despair, and obedience to Him is the cure for our dissatisfaction. We can choose to believe or deny what He says, but all of us one day will have to face Him and give an account of our lives.

How will you apply Solomon's wisdom in your life? How will living with an "above-the-sun" perspective transform the mundane tasks you undertake each day?

ENDNOTE

1. J. A. Patch, "Goad," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, E–J, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 491.



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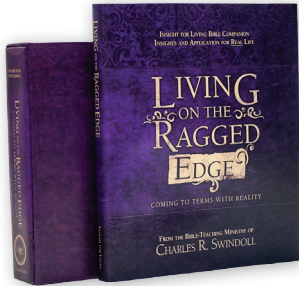
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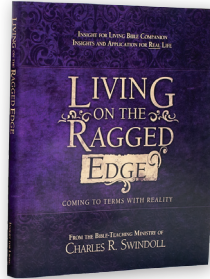
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