SEARCHING FOR HEAVEN ON EARTH

INTRODUCTION

One of the most amazing stories in the Old Testament concerns an obscure city called Abel (2 Samuel 20). This city had a reputation in Israel as being filled with wise people. The example we have of Abel's wisdom is startling.

David had given orders to his men to do away with a trouble-maker named Sheba. So Joab, the commander of David's men, set out to find and kill Sheba. Sheba took refuge in Abel, hoping the city would protect him. When the city's residents saw that Joab was prepared to destroy the city in order to get to Sheba, a "wise woman" called out to him. She asked Joab why he was going to destroy Abel and this "mother in Israel." Joab said all he wanted was Sheba—he would spare the city if they would deliver the fugitive to him.

The woman told Joab (in essence), "Wait right there." Shortly, the head of Sheba came sailing over the city wall! Joab packed up his troops and returned to Jerusalem—mission accomplished.

Did the residents of Abel live up to their reputation for wisdom? In the purest sense of the Hebrew word for *wisdom*, they absolutely did. *Wisdom* meant "skill" in the Old Testament, and the residents of Abel were filled with it. They weighed their options—protect Sheba or protect themselves—and chose the latter.

In our genteel day, we might be a little shocked at that display of wisdom. We think of a wise person as someone who is quiet, thoughtful, and studious, dispensing wisdom in clipped phrases from the comfort of a wing-backed chair. But in the Old Testament, wisdom was a matter of observation and implementation.

The wisest man in the Old Testament was Solomon, and he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes (and Proverbs and Song of Solomon as well). Solomon demonstrated Abel-like tendencies himself (1 Kings 3:16-28). The book of Ecclesiastes displays Solomon's observation-implementation skill applied to evaluating life itself. It was written after Solomon spent many years observing what worked and what didn't work about life. He had wandered away from the God of his youth, the wife of his youth, and the worldview of his youth, and found himself a discouraged and regretful old king.

For decades, Solomon tried to find meaning in life through riches, extravagant and profligate living, his work as king, and through the study of philosophies and beliefs of others. Ecclesiastes is the history of that ill-fated search, written at the end of his life when he came back to the conclusion of his youth: God is at the center of life and to ignore Him makes life vain and meaningless. Life is a matter of deceptive illusions when it is lived apart from God.

It's a shame that Solomon's great skill had to be applied in a search to which he already possessed the answer. God had given Solomon his wisdom as a young king; he knew there was no life apart from God (1 Kings 3:4-15). But he spent years proving what he had learned in his youth—and then wrote a book full of his observations.

In the end, Solomon got it right. Like the residents of Abel, he weighed his options and chose correctly. His "conclusion of the whole matter" is that "man's all" is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Almost too late, he validated his own reputation as the wisest man in Israel.

Fortunately, God has given us Ecclesiastes to spare us our own search for the meaning of life. Observe Solomon's search and implement his solution. It's the wisest thing you could possibly do.