Ecclesiastes: the full English text
The VK version

As published in
*Vanity Karma: Ecclesiastes, the Bhagavad-gītā, and the meaning of life*by Jayādvaita Swami

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This English rendering of Ecclesiastes is my own updated version of the translation published in 1917 by the Jewish Publication Society. Sometimes I have picked up words that other translations use. Sometimes, taking note of matters clarified by modern scholarly discussions, I have switched to an alternative meaning preferred by one or another learned commentator. And I have made other small adjustments. In all cases, I made sure that whatever choices I made that affected meaning were supported by one or more respected mainstream scholars.

I have chunked the text into groups of verses for the sake of convenience. My groupings reflect no commitment to any theory about the structure of the book. The book’s most obvious structural feature – its division into chapters – was first brought into it only during the Middle Ages, some thousand or more years after the book was written. Originally the book had no chapters; it was one continuous text.

 – Jayādvaita Swami

# Chapter 1

1 The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! 3 What profit does a man have from all his labor at which he labors under the sun? 4 One generation passes away, and another generation comes, and the earth abides forever. 5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he arises. 6 The wind goes toward the south, and it circles to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they go again. 8 All things toil to weariness, more than man can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there a thing of which it might be said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. 11 There is no remembrance of the people of former times; nor of the people of times yet to come will there be any remembrance among those who come after.

12 I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I set my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is a sore task that God has given to men to be busy with. 14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, indeed, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. 15 That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be counted. 16 I spoke with my heart, saying, “Just see, I have gotten great wisdom, more also than all who were before me over Jerusalem.” Indeed, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also was a chasing after wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow.

# Chapter 2

1 I said in my heart, “Come now, let me make you try pleasure. Enjoy what is good!” And – just see! – this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter “It is mad” and of pleasure “What does it accomplish?” 3 I searched in my heart how to ply my body with wine – my heart still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what is best for men to do under heaven the few days of their life.

4 I made great works: I built myself houses; I planted myself vineyards. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forests springing up with trees. 7 I bought men and women as servants, and had servants born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered myself silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I got myself singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delights of men.

9 So I became great and flourished more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. And also my wisdom stood with me. 10 Nothing that my eyes desired did I keep from them, nor did I withhold my heart from any joy, for my heart had joy in all my labor and this was my portion from all my labor. 11 Then I turned to look upon all the works that my hands had done, and on the labor I had labored to do. And – just see! – all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

12 And I turned to look upon wisdom, and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Just that which has already been done. 13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as much as light excels darkness. 14 The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And I also perceived that one event happens to them all. 15 Then I said in my heart, “As it happens to the fool, so will it happen even to me. And why then have I become so very wise?” Then I said in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man any more than of the fool; in the days to come, all will have long been forgotten. And how must the wise man die just like the fool!

17 So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. 18 And I hated the fruit of all my labor at which I had labored under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will be after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have power over all for which I have labored, and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.

20 Therefore I turned my heart to despair over all the labor at which I had labored under the sun. 21 For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skill, yet to a man who has not labored at it he must leave his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man have from all his labor, and from the striving of his heart, at which he labors under the sun? 23 For all his days are painful, and his occupation vexing; even at night his heart has no rest. This also is vanity.

24 There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and let himself enjoy pleasure for his labor. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. 25 For who will eat, or who will enjoy, apart from him? 26 For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the one who is offensive he gives the task of gathering and heaping up, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

# Chapter 3

1 To every thing there is a season,

and a time to every purpose under heaven:

2 A time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

3 A time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 A time to rend, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 A time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

9 What profit has he who works in that in which he labors? 10 I have seen the travail that God has given man to be busy with. 11 He has made everything fitting for its time. He has also set the world in their hearts, yet they cannot find out the work that God has done from the beginning to the end.

12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to get pleasure so long as they live. 13 And also for any man to eat and drink and enjoy pleasure in all his labor – this is a gift of God.

14 I know that whatever God does will be forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. And God has so made it so that men should fear him. 15 That which is has been long ago, and that which is to be has already been; and God seeks that which is pursued.

16 And moreover I saw under the sun: There in the place of justice, wickedness! In the place of righteousness, wickedness there! 17 I said in my heart, “The righteous and the wicked, God will judge, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.” 18 I said in my heart in regard to men, God is testing them so they may see that they are but beasts. 19 For what happens to men and what happens to beasts are the same. As the one dies, so dies the other; they all have one breath, and man has no advantage above the beast, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place; all are from the dust, and to dust all return. 21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth? 22 And so I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works, for that is his portion. For who will bring him to see what will be after him?

# Chapter 4

1 Then I turned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And oh, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! And on the side of their oppressors there was power – and no one to comfort them. 2 So I declared that the dead, since already dead, are better off than the living who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

4 Again, I saw that all labor and all excelling in work arise from a man’s rivalry with his neighbor. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. 5 The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. 6 Better is a handful of quietness than both hands full of labor and a chasing after wind.

7 Then I turned and saw another vanity under the sun. 8 There is one who is alone, and he has no one else; he has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labor, nor is his eye satisfied with riches: “And for whom then do I labor and deprive myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity – a grievous business.

9 Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. 10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has no one to lift him up. 11 Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one be warm alone? 12 And though an attacker might prevail against one man alone, two will withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to receive advice. 14 For out of prison he [the youth] came forth to be king, though in his reign too a poor man was born. 15 I saw that all the living who walk under the sun were with the second youth, who was to succeed him. 16 There was no end to all the people, all those whom he led; yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

# Chapter 5

1 Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Drawing near to listen is better than offering the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. 2 Do not be rash with your mouth, and let your heart not be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. 3 For dreams come with many doings, and a fool’s voice with many words. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not be slack to pay it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 Better for you not to vow than to vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your mouth bring you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For through a multitude of dreams and vanities there are also many words; but fear God.

8 If you see in the state the oppression of the poor and the perversion of justice and right, do not be astonished at the matter, for the high official is watched by one higher and there are still higher ones over them. 9 But the profit for a land in every way is a king who makes himself a servant to the field.

10 He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, nor he who loves wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, those who eat them increase, and what advantage has their owner but to see those goods with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of a laboring man, whether he eats little or much; but the overfullness of the rich man will not allow him to sleep.

13 There is a grievous evil I have seen under the sun: riches are kept by their owner to his hurt, 14 and those riches perish by a bad venture; and though he has begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand. 15 As he came forth of his mother’s womb, so again will he go, naked as he came, and will take nothing for his labor that he may carry away in his hand. 16 And this also is a grievous evil, that just as he came, so will he go; and what profit does he have that he should labor for the wind? 17 All his days also he eats in darkness, and he has much vexation and sickness and wrath.

18 This is what I have seen to be good: It is fitting for one to eat and to drink and to enjoy pleasure for all his labor at which he labors under the sun all the few days of the life God has given him, for this is his portion. 19 Every man also to whom God has given riches and property and the power to enjoy them, and to take his portion and rejoice in his labor – this is a gift of God. 20 For he will scarcely mark the days of his life, for God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart.

# Chapter 6

1 There is an evil I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon men: 2 a man to whom God gives riches, property, and honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he may desire, yet God gives him no power to enjoy it, but a stranger enjoys it. This is vanity, and it is an evil disease. 3 If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his desire to enjoy good things is not fulfilled and moreover he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he. 4 For it comes in vanity and departs into darkness and its name is covered with darkness; 5 moreover, it has not seen the sun nor known anything; yet it has more rest than he. 6 Indeed, though he live a thousand years twice told, if he enjoys no good – do not all go to one place? 7 All a man’s labor is for his mouth, and yet his appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage does the wise have over the fool? Or what advantage the poor man in knowing how to conduct himself before the living? 9 Better is the seeing of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

10 Whatever has come to be, its name was already given; and what man is, is foreknown; nor can man contend with him who is mightier than he. 11 The more words, the more vanity. How then is man the better? 12 For who knows what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life, which he spends like a shadow? For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

# Chapter 7

1 A good name is better than precious oil, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth. 2 Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men, and the living should take it to heart. 3 Vexation is better than laughter, for with a bad face the heart is made better. 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of fools in the house of mirth. 5 Better to hear the rebuke of a wise man than to hear the song of fools. 6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity.

7 Surely oppression turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. 8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and better the patient in spirit than the proud. 9 Do not be hasty in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools. 10 Do not say, “How was it that the former days were better than these?” for it is not out of wisdom that you ask this.

11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance – indeed, a profit to those who see the sun. 12 For wisdom is a refuge, even as money is a refuge; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

13 Consider the work of God, for who can make straight what he has made crooked? 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man should find out nothing that will come after him.

15 Both I have seen in the vain days of my life: there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.

16 Do not be righteous overmuch, nor make yourself overwise; why should you ruin yourself? 17 Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish; why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you should take hold of the one while not letting go of the other, for he that fears God will succeed with both. 19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise more than ten mighty men who are in a city. 20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin. 21 And do not give heed to all words that are spoken, lest you hear your servant revile you; 22 for your own heart knows that you yourself have likewise many times reviled others.

23 All this have I tested by wisdom. I said, “I shall be wise,” but it was far from me. 24 Far away is that which is, and deep, very deep. Who can find it out?

25 I turned, I and my heart, to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness of madness.

26 And more bitter than death I found woman, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. He with whom God is pleased will escape her, but he who goes wrong will be taken by her. 27 Just see, says Qohelet, this I have found, adding one thing to another to find the sum, 28 which my soul sought again and again but I have not found. One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all those I have not found. 29 Only, see this that I have found, that God made man upright but they have sought out many inventions.

# Chapter 8

1 Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? Wisdom makes a man’s face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

2 Keep the king’s command, in the manner of an oath to God. 3 Do not be hasty to go out of his presence, and do not persist in an evil thing, for he does whatsoever pleases him. 4 For the king’s word has power, and who may say to him, “What are you doing?”

5 Whoever obeys the command will come to no harm, and a wise man’s heart discerns the time and way. 6 For to every matter there is a time and a way. Truly the troubles of man are heavy upon him, 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him when it will be? 8 There is no man who has power over the wind to restrain the wind, nor power over the day of death, and there is no discharge from war, nor can wickedness save the one who has it. 9 All this I saw as I applied my heart to all that is done under the sun, when one man has power over another to the other’s hurt.

10 Then I saw the wicked buried, and they entered into their rest; but they who had done right went away from the holy place and were forgotten in the city. This also is vanity.

11 Because a sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of man is fully set to do evil. 12 For a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his days. And I also know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before him, 13 but it will not be well with the wicked man, nor will he prolong his days, which are like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

14 There is a vanity which takes place upon the earth: that there are righteous men to whom things happen that are fit for the acts of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom things happen that are fit for the acts of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

15 So I commended enjoyment, for a man has no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry, for this should accompany him in his labor all the days of the life that God has given him under the sun.

16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth – for neither day nor night do men’s eyes see sleep – 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. Though a man labor to seek it out, he will not find it. And even though a wise man claims to know, he will not be able to find it out.

# Chapter 9

1 Indeed, all this I laid to my heart, and I examined all this: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. Whether it be love or hatred, man does not know; all is before them. 2 All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked, to the clean and to the unclean, to him who sacrifices and to him who does not; as it is for the good, so it is for the sinner, and for him who swears as for him who fears to swear. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event for all. Moreover, the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that – to the dead!

4 For him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better off than a dead lion. 5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything, nor do they any longer have any reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. 6 Their love, their hatred, and their envy have already perished; nor do they have a portion any longer in anything done under the sun.

7 Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. 8 Let your garments be always white, and let oil not be lacking for your head. 9 Live joyfully with the woman you love all the days of your life of vanity, which he has given you under the sun, all the days of your vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you labor under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your strength, for there is no work, nor thought, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

11 I turned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. 12 Indeed, man does not know his time; like fish taken in an evil net, and like birds caught in a snare, even so are men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.

13 This also have I seen as an example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me: 14 There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and surrounded it, and built great siegeworks against it. 15 Now there was found in it a man poor but wise, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 Then I said, “Wisdom is better than strength; but the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.”

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.

# Chapter 10

1 A dead fly makes the perfumer’s ointment stink; so does a little folly outweigh wisdom and honor. 2 A wise man’s heart is at his right hand, but a fool’s heart at his left. 3 And even when a fool walks by the way, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

4 If the anger of the ruler rises up against you, do not leave your place, for gentleness allays great offenses. 5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun, an error indeed that proceeds from the ruler: 6 Folly is set on great heights, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves upon horses, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

8 He who digs a pit may fall into it, and he who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. 9 He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. 10 If the iron is blunt and one does not whet the edge, then he must exert more strength; but wisdom helps one succeed. 11 If the snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.

12 The words of a wise man’s mouth win favor, but the lips of a fool will swallow him. 13 The words of his mouth begin in foolishness, and his talk ends in grievous madness. 14 A fool also multiplies words; yet a man does not know what will be, and who can tell him what will happen after him? 15 The labor of a fool wears him out, for he does not even know how to go to town.

16 Woe to you, O land, when your king is a lackey and your princes feast in the morning! 17 Happy are you, O land, when your king is a free man and your princes eat at the proper time, for strength and not for drunkenness!

18 Through laziness the rafters sag, and through idleness of the hands the house leaks. 19 A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life glad, and money answers everything.

20 Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts, and do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom, for a bird of the air may carry your voice, or some winged creature may tell the matter.

# Chapter 11

1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. 2 Give a portion to seven people – indeed, even to eight – for you do not know what evil will be upon the land.

3 If the clouds are full, they will empty rain upon the earth, and whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there will it be. 4 He who watches the wind will not sow, and he who gazes at the clouds will not reap. 5 Just as you do not know what is the way of the wind, nor how the bones are formed in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who does all things. 6 In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, whether this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

7 Sweet is the light, and pleasant it is for the eyes to behold the sun. 8 Indeed, even if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all, yet keep in mind the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that comes is vanity.

9 Rejoice, young man, while in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. 10 Therefore put away vexation from your heart, and turn away pain from your flesh; for youth and its black hair are vanity.

# Chapter 12

1 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say “I have no pleasure in them”; 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark and the clouds return after the rain; 3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease because they are few, and those that look out grow dark in the windows; 4 when the doors in the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one starts up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; 5 when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; and the almond tree blossoms, and the locust drags itself along, and the caperberry fails; because a man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets; 6 before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is shattered, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel falls shattered into the pit, 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

8 Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet; all is vanity. 9 Still left to say is that Qohelet was wise and he also taught the people knowledge. Having listened and deliberated, he set in order many proverbs. 10 Qohelet sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth honestly.

11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails well fastened by a shepherd are the sayings of the masters of collections. 12 And furthermore, my son, of these be wary. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, even every hidden thing, whether good or evil.