

LIFE-STUDY OF ECCLESIASTES

MESSAGE ONE

VANITY OF VANITIES

(1)

Scripture Reading: Eccl. 1:1-11

In this message we will give an introductory word to the life-study of Ecclesiastes and then begin to consider the book itself.

I. AN INTRODUCTORY WORD

A. The Title

Ecclesiastes in Hebrew is *Qohelet*, meaning “preacher” (or “teacher”), one who gathered and spoke to an assembly of the children of Israel.

B. The Writer

The writer of Ecclesiastes was the wise King Solomon (1:1, 12; 12:9; cf. 1 Kings 4:32).

C. The Time

The time of writing was about 977 B.C., after Solomon's fall.

D. The Place

The place of writing was Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:1, 12).

E. The Contents

The contents of Ecclesiastes are a description by Solomon, after his falling away from God and returning back to God, concerning the human life of fallen mankind under the sun, which is in the corrupted world. He set his heart to seek and to search out all that is done under the heavens, and he

observed that according to the natural phenomena all the things done in cycle remain the same, generation after generation, all wearisome and nothing new. In his conclusion, this is all vanity of vanities and a chasing after wind to the human life of fallen mankind. Such a conclusion of the wise king by his wisdom may be considered a history of the vain life of a fallen man. His conclusion in this book is like a dirge to a man whose end is in misery.

According to Ecclesiastes, human history, from its beginning to the present, is vanity. Because creation has been made subject to vanity and to the slavery of corruption, everything under the sun is vanity. Paul's word concerning this in Romans 8:20-21 corresponds to Ecclesiastes. Today everyone is actually not living but dying. We have been born to die; that is, we have been dying since the day of our birth. From this we see that human life under the sun is vanity of vanities.

F. The Central Thought

Solomon had unequaled wisdom, the supreme position, unsurpassed wealth, and hundreds of wives and concubines, and fell in the indulgence of his lust to an unparalleled extent. Through all the positive and negative experiences of the human life under the sun, his thought was deeply impressed and occupied with the central thought of this book, that is, the vanity of vanities of the human life under the sun in its falling away from God. Man was created by God with the highest and most noble purpose, that is, to express Him in the resemblance of Him in His life, nature, and expression. But God's enemy, Satan the devil, came in to inject himself as sin into the man created by God for His purpose. Through this fall of man, man and all the created things that had been committed by God to his dominion were brought into the slavery of corruption, made subject to vanity (Rom. 8:20-21). Thus, the human life in the corrupted world also became a vanity, a chasing after wind. The writer Solomon had fully realized this and stressed this to the uttermost in his description. Yet he was not fully disappointed in this, but rather he instructed men that there is a way to get out of

this vanity, that is, to come back to God and take God as man's everything, redemption, life, wealth, enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction, that man still may be used by God to fulfill His original purpose in man for the fulfillment of His eternal economy (Eccl. 12:13-14).

II. THE BOOK ITSELF

A. The Opening Word

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 is the opening word.

1. The Writer

Verse 1 indicates that the writer was Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem—the Preacher.

2. The Theme

In verses 2 through 11 we see that the theme of this book is vanity of vanities.

a. All the Works of Man under the Sun Being Done in Cycle

All the works of man under the sun are done in cycle (vv. 3-4). Every day the sun rises and goes down. Every year one season follows another. Parents bring forth children and eventually die. The children grow and bring forth children of their own, and then they die. The cycle goes on and on, with nothing new.

b. All Remaining the Same

All remain the same, generation after generation, like the phenomena in nature (vv. 4-7).

c. All Being Wearisome

All are wearisome, nothing is satisfying, nothing is new, and nothing is remembered (vv. 8-11).

B. The Writer's Experiments

Ecclesiastes 1:12—6:12 is a lengthy section concerned with the writer's experiments.

1. In Wisdom and Knowledge

The first experiment is in wisdom and knowledge (1:12-18). The writer says that it is grievous travail that God has given to the children of men to travail in (v. 13). What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (v. 15). In much wisdom is much vexation, and the increase of knowledge increases sorrow (v. 18). To know wisdom and to know madness and folly also are a chasing after wind (v. 17).

2. In Pleasure

In 2:1-11 we have the experiment in pleasure, in particular of enjoyment (vv. 1-2), drinking (v. 3), building and planting (vv. 4-6), possessions (v. 7), silver and gold (v. 8a), music (v. 8b), and the delights in concubine after concubine (v. 8c). Solomon's unparalleled experiences of these pleasures with his wisdom were all found by him to be vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was no advantage under the sun (vv. 9-11).

3. In Being a Wise Man or a Fool

Verses 12 through 26 describe the experiment in being a wise man or a fool.

a. To Be a Wise Man Being Better than to Be a Fool

To be a wise man is better than to be a fool, but after death both become a vanity, a chasing after wind. So Solomon hated life under the sun which was grievous to him (vv. 12-17).

b. Solomon, as a Man Who Labored, Leaving the Issue of His Labor to One Who Had Not Labored

Solomon, as a man who had labored with wisdom, knowledge, skill, and striving and would leave the issue of his labor to a man who had not labored, hated all his labor under the sun and despaired of it because he would leave his gain to the man after him, considering it a great evil, sorrow, and vexation that caused his heart to have no rest in the night. Hence, all this was vanity and a chasing after wind to him (vv. 18-23).

c. Solomon Recognizing What Is from the Hand of God

Solomon considered that nothing is better for man than to eat, drink, and make his soul taste enjoyment in his labor and recognized that this is from the hand of God, who gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to the man who is good in His sight (3:13; 5:18-20), but to the sinner, the travail of gathering and heaping up for him who is good in God's sight. To him this also was vanity and a chasing after wind (2:24-26).

4. In Fate under God's Sovereignty

In 3:1-15 we have a word regarding the experiment in fate under God's sovereignty.

a. There Being a Season for Everything

There is a season for everything, appointed by God. What profit does the worker have in all that he labors? (vv. 1-9).

*b. The Reasons Why God
Appointed a Season for Everything*

Solomon goes on to list the reasons why God appointed a season for everything.

1) God Having Given the Children of Men to Travail

God has given the children of men to travail in travail (v. 10).

2) God Having Put Eternity in Man's Heart

God has made everything beautiful in its own time and has put eternity (an aspiration for the things in eternity) in man's heart, yet so that man does not find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (v. 11). In His creation of man, God put something into man which Solomon called "eternity." This means that in man there is a kind of aspiration for God, an aspiration for something eternal. Physical things may be enjoyable, but they are temporal.

Many successful people can testify that when they were endeavoring to advance in their career, they sensed that there was an emptiness within them. They began to realize that they were seeking something eternal. After they gained something they wanted, they felt that it was nothing. This feeling comes from the aspiration in man's heart for something eternal.

According to our own experience we know that whenever we have a success in our human life, we also have an empty feeling. This indicates that within man there is an aspiration for eternal things. God has put such an aspiration, such a seeking, in man's heart so that he will seek God. Every person, especially every thoughtful person, has within him this longing and seeking for eternity.

**3) *There Being Nothing Better for Man
than to Rejoice and Do Good in His Lifetime***

Verses 12 and 13 say that there is nothing better for man than to rejoice and do good in his lifetime, eating, drinking, and tasting enjoyment in all his labor; it is the gift of God.

God created man for Himself, but man was seduced by Satan to give God up, and thus man became fallen. Nevertheless, God still blesses man so that he may have a good living and enjoy various material things. By blessing man with material things, God maintains the existence of mankind from generation to generation. God has preserved man in this way for the sake of the redemption of His chosen ones.

Apart from God's blessing no one could bear to live on earth. On the one hand, everything under the sun is vanity of vanities and is subject to the slavery of corruption. On the other hand, certain things in human life, such as education, work, and marriage, are still very appealing. If we did not strive to gain an education or to succeed in our work or to have a good married life and family life, we might be tempted to commit suicide. God uses man's striving for these things in order to keep man on earth. If mankind ceased to exist, God could not gain His chosen ones from among the fallen human race. If mankind had been terminated, Christ

could not have come, for there would have been no lineage for His incarnation.

Although man is fallen, God continues to bless man, causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall and maintaining a proper order in the universe. As a result, people have the desire to go on living. In this way mankind is preserved for God to fulfill His purpose in choosing us before the foundation of the earth.

We were born at the right time and in the right place. Therefore, we all are here today for God's purpose. Without God's sovereign preservation of physical, human life, none of us could exist for His purpose. I believe that this is the correct understanding of Solomon's thought when he wrote that "every man should eat and drink and taste enjoyment in all his labor; it is the gift of God" (v. 13).

**4) God Having Appointed
All Things Which Are in the Present
and Which Will Be in the Future**

God, in His sovereignty over all, has appointed all things which are in the present and which will be in the future and seeks to reemploy the things which took place in the past. Whatever God does will be forever; nothing can be added to it, nor can anything be taken from it, that all would fear Him that they may have His wisdom to realize the real meaning of human life (vv. 14-15).

5. In Ranks and Classes in Human Society

Ecclesiastes 3:16—4:16 is concerned with Solomon's experiment in ranks and classes in human society.

a. The Judgment of God Bringing the Righteous Down

The judgment of God in the appointed time brings the righteous down to the same level as the wicked (3:16-17).

b. God Proving That Men Are But Beasts

This is for God to prove that men are but beasts, bringing men down to the same level as beasts. Thus, there is nothing better than that a man take his portion to rejoice in his

works, for who will bring him to see what will be after him? (vv. 18-22).

*c. The Oppressed Being in Tears
and the Oppressors Having Power*

The oppressed are in tears and the oppressors have power, but both have no comforter. Solomon praised the dead more than the living and even the more the one who has not yet been and has not seen the evil work under the sun (4:1-3).

*d. All Labor and All Skill in Work
Causing Man's Jealousy for His Neighbor*

All labor and all skill in work cause man's jealousy for his neighbor. The fool folds his hands together and consumes his own flesh. One handful with quietness is better than two hands full with labor. All these are vanity and a chasing after wind (vv. 4-6).

e. One Who Is Alone and without a Second

One who is alone and without a second, having no son or brother, labors without end. His eye is not satisfied with riches, but he labors and deprives himself for no one. Two are better than one, and three are even better than two (vv. 7-12).

*f. A Poor but Wise Youth
Being Better than an Old and Foolish King*

A poor but wise youth is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to be admonished (vv. 13-16).

LIFE-STUDY OF ECCLESIASTES

MESSAGE TWO

VANITY OF VANITIES

(2)

Scripture Reading: Eccl. 12:13-14

In this message we will continue to consider the writer's experiments and then go on to see his searching and testing.

6. In Contacting God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 describes the writer's experiment in contacting God.

a. In the View of Caution

Solomon's word here is not in the view of encouragement but in the view of caution. This is different from the view of the apostle Paul in encouraging the believers to approach God for receiving mercy and finding grace for timely help (Heb. 4:16).

b. Guarding Our Steps

When We Go to the House of God

Ecclesiastes 5:1a cautions us to guard our steps when we go to the house of God.

c. Drawing Near to Listen

Verse 1b charges us to draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they are doing evil.

d. Not Being Rash with Our Mouth

We should not be rash with our mouth and not let our heart hastily utter anything before God, for God is in heaven

and we are on the earth. Therefore, we should let our words be few, unlike the fool's multitude of words (vv. 2-3).

e. Not Delaying in Paying Our Vow to God

Verses 4 through 6 tell us not to delay in paying our vow to God. It is better that we not vow than that we vow and not pay.

f. Fearing God

Verse 7 says, "For in the multitude of dreams and in many words are also vanities. Rather, fear God."

7. In Sundry Illustrations

In 5:8-17 and 6:1-12 we have sundry illustrations of various things in human life that are vanity.

*a. A Poor Man Being Oppressed
under the Wrestling of Justice and Righteousness*

In a province a poor man is oppressed under the wrestling of justice and righteousness, although there are ranks of officials who should attend to this matter and even there is a king who is used to doing things for the advantage of the land. This is vanity (5:8-9).

b. The Ones Who Love Silver Not Being Satisfied

The ones who love silver and love abundance with income will not be satisfied, and the fullness of the rich will not let him sleep. This is also vanity (vv. 10-12).

c. The Rich Man Keeping His Riches to His Hurt

The rich man keeps his riches to his own hurt, and his riches are lost in a bad venture and nothing is left for his son. He has labored for the wind, eating in darkness and having much vexation and sickness and resentment. This is a grievous evil and is also vanity (vv. 13-17).

d. An Evil That Is Heavy upon Man

According to 6:1-2 an evil that is heavy upon man concerns a man to whom God gives riches, wealth, and honor. God

does not empower him to eat of it, but a stranger eats it. This is vanity and an evil plague.

e. A Man Whose Soul Is Not Filled with Good

A man begets a hundred children and lives many years, but his soul is not filled with good and he even does not get a proper burial. He is worse off than a stillborn. This is also vanity (vv. 3-6).

*f. Man Laboring for His Mouth,
yet His Soul Not Being Filled*

Man labors for his mouth, yet his soul is not filled. What advantage, then, does the wise man have over the fool? And what advantage does the poor man have in knowing how to walk before the living? All these are vanity and a chasing after wind (vv. 7-9).

g. There Being Many Things Which Will Increase Vanity

In verse 12 the writer asks, "Who knows what is good for a man in life during the few days of his vain life, which he will spend as a shadow?" There are many things which will increase vanity. What is the advantage to man? (v. 11).

**8. Solomon Encouraging the Fallen Men
to Enjoy What God Has Given Them**

In all his experiments Solomon encouraged, according to God's economy, the fallen men under the sun to enjoy what God has given to them that they may exist and afford God the opportunity to carry out His eternal purpose in choosing and predestinating them for the issue of the Body of Christ and to maintain the fallen man of God's old creation to be the provision for God to bring in His new creation in Christ out of the old creation (2:24; 3:13; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10). This is proved by the apostle Paul's preaching in Acts 14:15-17 and 17:24-31.

Here we should note that for us to live a life that we may testify Christ and minister Christ to others to glorify God, we need the material things and physical matters. But we should not be attracted, captured, and usurped by them. If

we are usurped by them, we will suffer their vanity. We are living in the world and passing through the “vanity fair,” but we should not linger in it for its vainglory. Today all things of the old creation are under the slavery of corruption. If we do not escape “the corruption which is in the world by lust” (2 Pet. 1:4), we will share in its vanity.

C. The Writer’s Searching and Testing

In 7:1—12:12 we have the writer’s searching and testing.

1. Searching and Testing All Things of the Fallen Human Life

The writer searched and tested all things of the fallen human life under the sun (7:23-29; 8:9, 16; 12:9-10).

2. All Things Being Vanity of Vanities

All the things under the sun, regardless of the kind of persons involved, wise or foolish, diligent or lazy, rich or poor, old or young, high or low, righteous or wicked, good or sinful, clean or unclean, and regardless of how they were born, how they worked, how they died, and how their end was, all are vanity of vanities (7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8).

3. Proverbs, Words of Wisdom, Being Produced out of the Writer’s Searching and Testing

Proverbs, words of wisdom, were produced out of the writer’s searching and testing (7:1-9, 11-12, 14-17; 8:1b, 5b, 8; 9:4b, 7-12, 16-18; 10:1-2, 4b, 8-14a, 18-20; 11:1, 3-8; 12:11, 12b). All these proverbs are good for building up the character of one who lives a better human life, but they do not have the function to afford the growth in the divine life for the building up of the Body of Christ. Yet, for the building up of the Body of Christ there is the need of a proper character, not by self-cultivation but by the Spirit’s anointing under the work of the cross of Christ with the rich elements of Christ (Gal. 5:16; 2:20; Phil. 1:19-21).

4. What God Is to Man

The writer searched and tested what God is to man.

a. God Creating Man

God created man, so God is the Sovereign over man (Eccl. 7:29; 12:1).

*b. All Things concerning Man
Being in the Hand of God*

All things concerning man are in the hand of God, and God is inscrutable in His doings (9:1; 8:17; 7:13-14; 11:5).

c. God Judging Man in Everything

God will judge man in everything (3:17; 11:9; 12:14; Matt. 12:36; Rom. 2:5, 16; Acts 17:31; Rev. 20:11-13).

*d. God Giving Man a Portion
in Human Life for Him to Enjoy and Exist*

God gives man a portion in human life for him to enjoy and exist that God could have an opportunity to call out some for the carrying out of His eternal selection and predestination for the accomplishment of His eternal economy (Eccl. 8:15).

5. What Man Should Be to God

The writer also searched and tested what man should be to God.

a. Fearing God

Man should fear God that he may gain the wisdom from God to know how to live the human life and to know God further (7:18b; 8:12-13; 12:13).

b. Repenting to God

Man, being fallen from the God-created good condition into his schemes (7:29b) and having a heart full of evil (9:3), not one of whom is righteous, does good, and does not sin (7:20), should repent to God and receive the Redeemer whom God has prepared for him (Job 19:25).

c. Enjoying God's Provision

Man should enjoy God's provision for his living and the marriage life for man's existence and multiplication to replenish the earth (Gen. 1:28) that it may be possible for God to save some of them in order to produce the church—the Body of Christ—which will issue in the New Jerusalem as God's eternal enlargement and expression according to God's eternal economy (Eccl. 9:7-10).

The unveiling of the above points of the writer's experiments and searching and testing should not be considered the divine revelation from God, though they are included in the Scriptures. They are the conclusion of the writer's research in his experiments of the fallen men's human life under the sun. All the concluding words may be considered as proverbs, words of wisdom, directing the fallen and aim-missing men to return to God and receive Him according to His New Testament economy in His Son as their Redeemer and life that they may be regenerated to be the God-men for the accomplishment of God's eternal economy.

6. Advice to Young Men

In 11:9—12:1 the writer gives advice to young men.

*a. Young Men Endeavoring
to Enjoy the Human Life in Their Youth*

Young men should endeavor to enjoy the human life in their youth in the light of God's judgment to remove vexation from their heart and put away evil from their flesh (11:9-10).

b. Remembering Their Creator While They Are Young

Young men should remember their Creator while they are young and not hesitate in this until old age comes (12:1).

7. The Sad Portrait of Man's Old Age

In 12:2-8 the writer shows us the sad portrait of man's old age. The bright environment with the three lights created by God and the artificial ones made by man becomes gloomy, and the pleasant atmosphere of the clear sky is cloudy (v. 2). The hands, the keepers of the house, tremble (v. 3a). The

loins, the men of strength, are bent (v. 3b). The teeth become few (v. 3c), the eyes become dim (v. 3d), and the ears become dull to sound (v. 4a). One awakens early in the morning (v. 4b). The vocal cords become low (v. 4c). One is afraid of what is high (v. 5a) and is terrified in walking (v. 5b). The hair becomes white (v. 5c). One is unable to bear any burden, even any as small as a grasshopper (v. 5d). No medicine can keep the old man away from death, and mourners attend his funeral (v. 5e). The corpse—the spinal cord (the silver cord), the head (the golden bowl), the lungs (the pitcher), and the heart (the wheel)—decays (v. 6). The body made of dust returns to the earth, and the breath returns to God who gave it (v. 7; Gen. 2:7). This indicates that the entire human being with his human life apart from God is nothing but vanity of vanity (Eccl. 12:8).

D. The Concluding Word

In 12:13-14 we have the writer's concluding word.

1. The Writer's Intention

The writer's intention is to lead men to fear God that God may eventually show them His New Testament economy concerning the producing of His church, the Body of Christ, which consummates in the New Jerusalem as God's eternal enlargement and expression (v. 13).

2. God Judging Men in This Age and at His Great White Throne

God will judge men in this age for their deeds, even every secret thing, according to good or evil, and at His great white throne for their eternal destiny (v. 14; Rev. 20:11-15).

