

SESSION #28

ECCLESIASTES

This is probably the most unusual book in the whole Bible. I think we'll see why in just a few minutes. But it is also a highly relevant book for people in the 21st century.

1. Standpoint and Theme

In a sense this book is a sermon by someone called the Preacher or the Teacher, most likely referring to Solomon himself. However, it is written from the standpoint of natural reason. So even though it is delivered by a preacher/teacher it isn't a normal sermon. It's more like a philosophical treatise. He is going to philosophize on the ways of life, the value of life from a particular point of view. His point of view is not that of a spiritual person linked to God but a man using natural reason. It is important to keep this in mind in order to understand some of the things he says.

His theme is: *"What's the point of life? What is the chief good or profit in life? What is life all about?"* This book follows the quest of the natural man for the chief good in life.

As a result, he comes to this conclusion: Life is simply vanity (emptiness or meaninglessness) under the sun; but on the other hand, there is hope in God. Two key verses provide the contrasting balance in his outlook:

1:14 – *"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."*

Then in contrast to that conclusion, he says in 3:14 – *"I know that everything God does will endure forever."* Keeping this contrasting tension in mind will help us understand Ecclesiastes better.

2. Structure

Solomon is going to lead us through a Quest, his own personal quest for the meaning of life. Here briefly are the elements of this quest.

1) The first path he took on his quest was to learn things by **personal experiment**, chapters 1 & 2. This included searching for wisdom and knowledge. He studied a wide range of subjects intensely. In today's terms, he was the perpetual student, earning degree after degree. But the more he studied, the more frustrated he became until he concluded that the more knowledge you gain the more grief you have (1:17-18). It's just a *"chasing after the wind"*.

2) Then, since that didn't lead to a satisfying answer, he went on a quest in the area of **pleasure**. He said he did whatever his heart desired. So whatever he wanted to do, he just did it. And of course he had all the resources needed to do so. At times, this meant a wild lifestyle – bar hopping and discos. At other times, it involved more worthwhile efforts like urban renewal projects. It also meant building up his personal fortune, which was a pleasure to him too. Sometimes, he imported live music – rock bands to the palace – all in an attempt to maximize pleasure. But at the end of this quest, here was his conclusion:

"I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor on which I had toiled, and indeed all was vanity, a grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun. It's all meaningless; it's all emptiness." I went in this direction and pleasure didn't provide an answer.

3) In chapters 3, 4 and 5, he moves in another direction in his quest. This time he pursues **general observation**. Okay, if we can't find ultimate meaning in academic pursuits, and we can't find meaning in life through pleasure then can we find it by observing the world and human affairs - philosophy, sociology, economics? Remember that Solomon had the resources to explore these areas very deeply indeed. Nobody before or since has had the kind of personal resources that Solomon had.

Not only does he have phenomenal wealth, he's the king so he has terrific power. As an absolute ruler he can do what he wants, say what he wants, get what he wants. He can spend what he wants, buy whatever he wants. Not only that, but God gave him wisdom not matched by anyone before him or since. His mental capacity was greater than an Einstein.

In terms of a quest, he can go in any direction he wants and go further than anyone else has been able to go. That's one of the values of writing this quest down. You and I can never replicate that quest; we simply don't have the same resources. But we can learn important lessons from it.

By general observation Solomon discovered that human affairs didn't provide the answer to life either.

4) Okay, if that won't work, then what about **practical morality** (chapters 6, 7 and 8)? If a person pursues ethical living will that provide a meaning to life that will be significant and substantial? Well, his conclusion here is given in 8:14: *"In this life, good people are often treated as though they were wicked, and wicked people are often treated as though they were good. This is so meaningless."* (Living Bible)

So, ethics and practical morality don't provide any satisfying answer to the quest either.

3. Summary of the Quest

In chapters 9, 10 and 11 Solomon reviews his quest and gives us a summary: The true good cannot to be found in pleasure, nor in human wisdom, nor in ethical expedient behavior. It can only be found in wise enjoyment of present life combined with a steadfast faith in God. Chapter 12:13, *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter"...* and what is it? – *"Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* Wise enjoyment, yes, of present life. God gives gifts by just giving us life and all the blessings we do enjoy in this world. So, enjoy those things, but enjoy them wisely. Keep life in balance.

And in doing so, keep remembering that nothing "under the sun" – it's his favorite phrase; he uses it 29 times in this book! – in the material universe, can ever fully satisfy

us. We have to go beyond the sun to find real satisfaction. Life “under the sun” is vanity (futile); but in relationship to life beyond, to God Himself, it can have great significance.

George Bernard Shaw said, *“There are two tragedies in life: one is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it.”* Why are both considered “tragedies”? You get what you want, that’s a tragedy. You don’t get what you want, that’s a tragedy too! Why? Because even if we get what we want are we ever satisfied? No, we’re never satisfied.

4. The Message of the Book

The book of Ecclesiastes, in dealing with that kind of dynamic tension of tragedies in the meaning of life, helps us understand that’s the way life is designed. It’s designed that way by the Designer precisely so we will know not to pursue these things as ultimate reality.

Life is full of vanities, bubbles of emptiness, meaninglessness. They are meant to be bubbles, empty. All the things we can pursue in this life are simply passing, temporary ‘emptinesses’. They are meant to mock us in terms of providing ultimate satisfaction; they can never do it. Why?

So that in being dissatisfied we will be forced to turn to God and find our satisfaction beyond the sun where satisfaction alone can be found. That’s how God designed life. If we could be fully satisfied with anything less than God, then we wouldn’t need God. The emptiness of everything apart from God is clearly shown in this book of the preacher, Ecclesiastes.

Paul may have had this truth in mind when he wrote in Colossians 3:2 – *“Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”*

And the Apostle John, in 1 John 2:15-17 gives another New Testament take on this truth. In The Message translation it reads, *“Don’t love the world’s ways. Don’t love the world’s goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world – wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important – has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you*

from Him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting, is on the way out, but whoever does what God wants, is set for eternity.”

That’s a great New Testament commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes.

In our next session we will tackle the final book of Poetry and Wisdom as we examine the Song of Solomon.
