

“LIFE UNDER THE SUN”

Last week, we began a new sermon series on the book of Ecclesiastes. In that sermon, we looked at the first two verses of chapter 1, which contains the central thesis of the book: all is vanity. The centrality of this theme is underscored by the fact that the term translated as ‘vanity’ is used 38 times throughout the book. It is a term that literally means ‘vapor.’ When the Preacher says that everything is vanity, he is saying that everything in this life is fleeting and impermanent. As I said, this is the main point, or thesis, of the book. Today, as we look at verses 1-11, we will come across the first argument that the Preacher gives to support this thesis. Here we see him pointing to the repeated cycles of nature to demonstrate the futility of life under the sun. Though man makes much of himself and of his efforts, the fact of the matter is that the universe is really quite indifferent to our presence. The things that we accomplish with our lives do not really mean anything because they do not really change anything. Try as we might, we cannot really get anywhere through all of our toilsome labor. In the words of one commentator, these verses depict life “as a monotonous prison.” [Garrett, 284] Is there a goal or meaning or purpose to life? That is the question that the Preacher is addressing in these verses.

He begins by stating the question directly: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” And this question introduces us to two more important themes in Ecclesiastes. The first is that of ‘toil,’ a term that is used 28 times in the book. The Preacher has a lot to say about work, because work is such a fundamental part of life.

And it is important to remember that work was a central component of human life from the very beginning, even before the fall. Genesis 2 tells us that after God created the first man he placed him in the garden of Eden “to work it and keep it.” [Gen. 2:15] That took place before the fall. Work is not a result of the fall. From the very beginning, God created human beings to do the work of ruling and cultivating his world. Our work is an important part of what it means for us to be created in the image of God.

But the fall has had a devastating effect upon human work. This too is seen in the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit, God said to the man,

“cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground.” [Gen. 3:17-19]

Because of the fall, human work has become toilsome and frustrating. Notice, though, that there was also grace in the midst of God’s declaration of the curse upon our work. Man’s work is toilsome, but he is still able to produce bread to eat. Work is frustrated by the fall, but it is not rendered utterly fruitless.

Both of these truths are fundamental to the Preacher’s attitude towards human toil. On the one hand, he does not deny the fact that we can find a degree of satisfaction in our

work. At times he is quite positive in his evaluation of work, saying things like “my heart found pleasure in all my toil” [2:10]; and, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” [2:24]; and, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” [9:10].

At the same time, the Preacher’s overall perspective on work always keeps the reality of the fall in mind. For he also says, “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me” [2:18]; and “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” [4:4] The Preacher recognizes that the fall has brought all sorts of aggravation to human work. And chief among these is the fact that we cannot really accomplish or gain anything by our work. Even though the Preacher states the question in verse 3 rhetorically, the context makes the answer abundantly clear. What does man gain by all his toil under the sun? He gains nothing.

This brings us to the other important theme introduced in verse 3, the phrase “under the sun.” This phrase is repeated 28 times throughout the book. It is the Preacher’s way of describing the point of view from which he makes his observations about life in this world. And it needs to be pointed out that this is not what we would call a ‘secular’ perspective on life. The phrase “under the sun” is not a device used to describe what the world looks like from a man-centered, or secular humanist, point of view. The Preacher is not saying that this is what life would be like if you were to leave God out of the picture. There are far too many references to God in this book for us to say that. Instead,

when the Preacher talks about life “under the sun,” he is talking about the world as it appears to us. Of course, our perspective is limited, and the most important aspects of reality are things that are hidden from our view, things that can only be known by revelation and through faith. Still, life lived under the sun is life lived in this present age, life lived in this fallen world. The Preacher is not talking about a hypothetical world, the way the world would be if there was no God. He is talking about what the world really is like as a result of the fall. He is describing a world from which we need to be rescued. And we need to be rescued from it because it is a world that has been subjected to futility. This is the reason why we have nothing to gain from all our toil at which we toil under the sun.

In verses 4-7, the Preacher points out how creation itself parodies the futility of our endeavors in this life. People come and go, but the earth keeps on going. Yet just like our toilsome efforts, it never really gets anywhere. The sun rises each morning and sets every night, only to turn around and do the same thing again the next day. The wind blows in one direction and then in the next, but it never arrives at a permanent destination. Streams keep on flowing into the sea, but the sea never gets filled up. The cycles of nature are repeated over and over again, but they never get anywhere. And this is exactly what all of our endeavors are like in this fallen world. It is like we are running in circles. I can distinctly remember the point in my life when I came to realize this profound truth. It happened one day when I was a boy, when I had grown tired of having to mow the lawn week after week. One day I stopped and asked myself: why should I

keep on cutting the grass if it is just going to keep on growing anyway? What is the point? I seem to remember trying to persuade my parents of the logic of this observation, but for some reason they did not agree with me.

In verses 9-10, the Preacher says that the futility of life is also demonstrated by the fact that there is nothing new under the sun. You have probably heard the saying that goes, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Well, the Preacher takes things even further than that. He says that everyone is condemned to repeat the past, because there is not really anything new. Of course, he is not denying that man has the ability to invent and innovate. Man certainly makes many new things, especially in our technological age. However, in the grand scheme of things none of our inventions or innovations brings about any fundamental changes to the nature of reality. The same basic problems that people have faced throughout history still confront us today. As another saying goes, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Try as we might, we cannot change the fact that this world has been subjected to futility. The same old cycle continues to go on and on and on. We are in need to help from Someone who stands outside of this cycle, Someone who is able to bring about something new. Only the Lord can do that. And this is precisely what he is doing through the redemptive work of Christ. As he says in Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

The other example that the Preacher uses to demonstrate the futility of our efforts is the fact that everything that we do in this life is eventually forgotten. “There is no

remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those that come after.” Now of course it is true that there are a few people who do things that cause them to be remembered long after they are gone from this earth. There are famous people, but they are a very small minority compared to the millions upon millions who live and die in obscurity. And furthermore, what good is history’s remembrance of the famous anyway? History may remember Julius Caesar, or Constantine, or Karl Marx, but how does this remembrance benefit them? They are dead and gone.

The Preacher’s words about remembrance need to be understood in light of the larger context of Scripture. When the Bible speaks about being remembered, it is typically talking about something much more significant than merely being called to mind. Often, being remembered is closely associated with salvation. We see this in Genesis 8:1, where it says that “God remembered Noah” and then tells us how God saved Noah from the flood. Similarly, when the thief on the cross asked Jesus, “remember me when you come into your kingdom” [Lk. 23:42], he was not just asking Jesus to keep him in his thoughts. He was asking Jesus to save him. The reason why not being remembered is so tragic to the writer of Ecclesiastes is because it means being swallowed up by the futility of this fallen world.

The Preacher’s words about not being remembered bring to mind Psalm 103, where the psalmist says, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” [Ps.

103:15-16] Under the sun, our lives are quickly forgotten. But the good news is that there is One who is not under the sun, the One who made the sun and everything that stands beneath it. And he promises us that he will remember those who fear him, as we read in the very next verse of Psalm 103: “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him.” [Ps. 103:17] God’s remembrance is eternal. In the words of another psalm, “he remembers his covenant forever.” [Ps. 105:8; 111:5]

So what are we to say to the question that the Preacher poses in verse 3? Is there any purpose to the toil at which we toil under the sun? No, there is not. Not when it is merely “under the sun.” But this does not mean that we are doomed to live meaningless lives. Life can have meaning and purpose, but there is only one way for this to be the case. If nothing in this world has any lasting or permanent value, then our only hope is to live for something outside of this world, something that is lasting and permanent. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said,

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” [Mt. 6:20-21]

This world may seem like it always remains the same, continuing on and on in an endless cycle, but the Scriptures tells us that life under the sun is not going to continue forever. Everything in this world is subject to decay, and a day of judgment is coming. Life under the sun cannot and will not last. As the apostle Peter writes in his second epistle, everything that exists under the sun is destined to be dissolved on the great day of judgment. And for this reason, “we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” [2 Pet. 3:13] In other words, conduct your life in this under-the-sun world as one who belongs to another world. If you do that, if you live your life with heaven as your goal, then you will receive not just heaven, but the earth as well - not the earth as it currently exists “under the sun,” but a fully renewed and redeemed earth. And so, in the words of the Puritan minister Ezekiel Hopkins, “Let us turn the streams of our desires heavenward, where alone we can find permanent and satisfactory good.” [*Voices from the Past*, 108]