

**“VANITY OF VANITIES”**

Today we begin a new series of sermons in our morning worship service on the book of Ecclesiastes, a book that can be both deeply troubling and profoundly relevant. One biblical scholar describes Ecclesiastes as simultaneously “irritating” and mesmerizing, “mirroring the perplexity we all feel as we grapple with life” [Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 83]. Another says that it is “the most contemporary book in the Bible” [Ryken’s *Bible Handbook*, 268]. And another says that “there is no-one quite like [the Preacher]...no book in this whole great volume [the Bible] which speaks in quite his tone of voice” [Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 13]. I think that, as we study this book, we will find all of those statements to be true. The key themes of Ecclesiastes are of universal significance, and the thing that makes the book so arresting to us is the way in which the author handles these themes. As commentator Derek Kidner writes, “His concern is with the boundaries of life, and especially with the questions that most of us would hesitate to push too far.” [Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 13] Ecclesiastes deals with such topics as: the tragic reality of the fall; the fleeting nature of life; the reality of sin and death; the joy of life and the frustration of life; the grateful enjoyment of God’s gifts; and what it means to live in the fear of the Lord. As you can see from that list, this book covers a lot of ground. And the writer’s main purpose in it all is to give us a sense of the emptiness of a life lived by worldly values and of the attractiveness of a God-centered life that is properly contented with God’s good gifts.

One of the challenges in studying this book is trying to discern how it is organized. There are probably as many outlines of Ecclesiastes as there are commentaries on it. Some of these proposals are helpful, while others are quite fanciful. And some interpreters simply conclude that there is no discernible structure to the book. While I am not sure about a full-blown outline, one observation that I have found to be helpful in understanding the structure of the book is that it generally alternates between sections in which the author is making observations about life in this world and sections in which he is giving instructions about how to live in this world. [see Webb, 87] This helps us to see what the writer is doing. He is interpreting the nature of reality for us and then counseling us in how to live the best kind of life. We might even say that Ecclesiastes is the place to go to find out what the Bible has to say about how to live “Your Best Life Now,” although what it says is quite different than what Joel Osteen says in his bestselling book by that title.

We begin our study of this book by looking at the first two verses, which introduce us to the author of the book and to its principle theme. Verse 1 identifies Ecclesiastes as the work of “the Preacher, the Son of David, king in Jerusalem.” For most of church history, it was assumed that this was a reference to King Solomon, who was famous for his unrivaled wisdom and wealth. In recent years, however, this notion has been rejected by many biblical scholars, both conservative and skeptical ones. There are not many scholars today who would say that Solomon was the author of this book. The majority believe that there are several factors that indicate that the book originated at a date much

later than Solomon's era. We do not have the time this morning to go into all of the details behind this matter, but there are a couple of things that I should say about it. First of all, it is true that the text does not explicitly identify the author as Solomon, and this means that this is not an issue where the inerrancy of the Bible is under attack. That certainly would be the case if someone were to argue, as a number of scholars nowadays do argue, that the apostle Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles. We have to reject that notion, because Paul clearly identifies himself as the author of those letters. But Solomon is not identified as the author of this book. And he might not have been the author. That being said, I myself am not entirely convinced by the arguments of those scholars who have called Solomonic authorship of the book under question. And it should be noted that there are some respected scholars who still think that Solomon is the most likely author, and that there is still a great deal about the book that would commend Solomon as the author.

Whoever the author was, he does not identify himself by name. Instead, he refers to himself by the Hebrew title *Qoheleth*, a name that English versions typically translate as "Preacher" or "Teacher." Our name for the book, Ecclesiastes, is drawn from this Hebrew word, which is translated in both the Greek and Latin as *Ecclesiastes*. It is a term that is related to the Hebrew word for "assembly," which suggests that the author was someone who gathered or addressed the assembled people of God. Hence the translation "Preacher."

In verse 2, the Preacher states what could be described as his motto: “Vanity of vanities.” The Hebrew word translated as “vanity” literally means “vapor,” describing something that is transitory and fleeting. The Preacher uses this word to make the point that life itself is like a vapor; it is neither solid nor lasting. And he obviously wants us to get this point right away, as he uses the term five times in this one verse. This tells us something very important about the Preacher. He is a debunker, a man who has no patience for pretension or sentimentality. He is not going to paint an idealized picture of what he would like the world to be like. He wants us to see things as they really are, which explains why the book sometimes feels like a slap in the face to us.

In chapter 3, the Preacher says that God has placed eternity in our hearts. That is, God has created us so that we all have an innate sense that life does not end at death, a sense that there is more to human life than meets the eye. Because of this, we all want our life and our work to be meaningful and to have lasting value. But when the Preacher repeatedly tells us that all is vanity, he is saying that we have to recognize the fact that we are mortal, that our bodies are destined to return to the dust, as are all of the works of our hands.

What is the reason for this state of affairs? Why is everything vanity? It is because of the fall. The vaporous quality of life in this world is due to God’s judgment upon sinful man. The apostle Paul says so in Romans 8, in a passage where he sounds very much like the Preacher. Listen to what Paul says there:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For *the creation was subjected to futility*, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been *groaning* together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, *groan inwardly* as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” [Rom. 8:19-23]

The creation has been subjected to futility, to frustration. The creation groans. And even though we have been made children of God through faith in Christ, we too remain subject to this futility, this groaning. Yet Paul does not leave it at that. He says that we are not without hope. We are waiting for the fullness of our redemption. And this is what enables us to live meaningful lives in a world that is still subjected to frustration. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, because Christ has swallowed up death in victory, we can have faith “that in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain.” [1 Cor. 15:58]

I realize that this might seem confusing. How can the Preacher say that all is vanity when Paul says that in the Lord our labor is not in vain? How can both be true? And what does this say about the kind of attitude we should adopt towards life? Are we to be fundamentally optimistic or fundamentally pessimistic? What does the Bible prescribe? It prescribes neither. God calls his people to practice the truth, and this means that we

should be realistic. And when you think about it, why would anyone want to be anything else? Derek Kidner puts it so well when he writes,

“The searching questions [the Preacher] has asked are those that life itself puts to us, if we will only listen. He can afford to ask them, because in the final chapters he has good news for us, once we can stop pretending that what is mortal is enough for us, who have been given a capacity for the eternal.” [19]

The Preacher’s overall message is one of good news. He tells us that, while life apart from God is indeed meaningless, “life with God at the center opens the door to enjoying earthly life.” [*Ryken’s Bible Handbook*, 266]

I think that one helpful way to think about this is to consider how the Jews of Jesus’ day made use of the book of Ecclesiastes in their liturgical year. At some point in their history, the people of Israel began to read Ecclesiastes in public worship during their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, Tabernacles was one of the most joyous of the Jewish religious festivals, held at the end of the agricultural year. It was a time for the Israelites to give thanks for the ways in which the Lord had provided for their earthly needs. But, as the name of the feast indicates, it was also a time of remembering when they were still in the wilderness, when they had no land of their own and had to live in tents. Ecclesiastes fit in with this feast because it helped the people of Israel to keep their joyous celebration anchored in reality. It affirmed that it was right for them to enjoy this

life, to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in their work. But it also helped them to remember that life is not an accomplishment but a gift, and a temporary and provisional gift at that. Life is to be enjoyed, but not as that which is ultimate.

God's people always need to remember that we are on pilgrimage, that our true and lasting home is not here, but with God in his new creation kingdom. Charles Bridges, an 18<sup>th</sup> century English minister, puts it this way in his commentary on Ecclesiastes:

“All [in this world] is therefore utterly inefficient for the great end of man's true happiness. It only enlarges his desires in the endeavor to gratify them. But it leaves behind ‘an aching void,’ a blank, that it cannot fill up.” [5]

That is the message of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher wants us to know that this life, and everything in it, is but a vapor. Ecclesiastes is the exact opposite of sentimentality. The Preacher tells us the way things really are, and if you listen to what he has to say, you will find the only true rest and satisfaction to be had: the rest that the Lord promises to give to those who hunger and thirst for him. This is what George Herbert says so well in his beautiful poem “The Pulley,” with which I will conclude:

*When God at first made man,*

*Having a glass of blessing standing by;*

*Let us (said He) pour on him all we can:*

*Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span.*

*So strength first made a way;  
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that alone of all His treasure,  
Rest, in the bottom lay.*

*For if I should (said He)  
Bestow this jewel also on My creature,  
He would adore My gifts instead of Me,  
And rest in nature, not the God of nature:  
So both would losers be.*

*Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness:  
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,  
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness  
May toss him to My breast.*

(George Herbert, "The Pulley," cited in Kidner, 109-10)