

**“AN UNHAPPY BUSINESS”**

Two weeks ago, in our first sermon in this series on Ecclesiastes, we were introduced to the author of the book and to his main thesis: the notion that everything in this present age, this life “under the sun,” is vanity, vaporous, fleeting. And in last week’s sermon, we considered the first example that the Preacher gave in support of his thesis: the fact that, despite all of our toilsome efforts, we never really get anywhere in life. Even the repeated patterns in nature parody the futility of our efforts. And thus the Preacher came to the conclusion that there appears to be no purpose, no goal, to life “under the sun.” In today’s text, he tells us more about his attempts to make sense of life. The passage can be divided into two parts, the first part containing a description of his search and the second part containing a preliminary conclusion about his quest for wisdom and insight. And these verses serve to introduce the larger section that extends to the end of chapter 2, in which the Preacher describes three different ways in which he tried to find significance in life. So here we have the introduction to the Preacher’s search for satisfaction, a search that he characterizes as “an unhappy business.” He is devastatingly candid in telling us that his search for meaning and happiness has come up empty.

Our passage begins with the Preacher saying that he set out to use wisdom to make sense of “all that is done under heaven.” In other words, he wanted to understand the meaning and purpose of life. And it is important to note that when he talks about wisdom here, he is not just talking about matters of philosophy. In the Bible, wisdom has to do with how to live a good life in God’s world. It is highly practical. So the Preacher’s

conclusions about wisdom apply just as much to the self-help guru as they do to the scientist and the scholar.

The Preacher set out to understand how everything in life can be fit together into a picture of a good and happy and meaningful life. This is a desire that resides within each one of us. We all want to find meaning and significance in life. We all want to see how everything fits together. Of course, it is true that there are some people who suppress their soul's thirst for meaning. There are a few nihilists out there, people who deny that there is any meaning to life. And there are many more people who avoid having to face up to questions about life's meaning by immersing themselves in work, sex, alcohol, entertainment, or something else. Nevertheless, the desire for meaning is still there within us. We want life to make sense. And we are troubled when it does not.

The Preacher is someone who has experienced such trouble of mind. This is why he characterizes the search for meaning as "an unhappy business," a phrase that one commentator suggests could be translated as "a lousy job." [Garrett, 289] And notice what the Preacher says about where this lousy job has come from. He says that God is the one who gave it to us. By creating us as beings who want to make sense of life, God has given us an unhappy business to conduct in this life. It sounds rather harsh, but that is what the Preacher says. God is the one who has given us this "business." He is the one who made us so that we would hunger and thirst for wisdom, for understanding, for meaning.

Notice how this conflicts with the view of God that is held by so many people in our culture. Study after study reveals that most people believe in God. But the God in whom most people believe is a far cry from the God of the Bible. Most people conceive of God as a therapeutic deity, a God who is there to help you with your problems, when you want his help. A God like that would never do anything to make life more difficult for you. But that is not the God who is described in Ecclesiastes. Instead, the Preacher speaks of a God who does things that create problems for human beings, a God who gives us “an unhappy business” in life. The Preacher believes that everything in our lot in life comes from the hand of God. He would agree with these words from Thomas Boston: “God brings about every man’s lot, and all the parts thereof.” [*The Crook in the Lot*, 18] The Preacher recognizes that everything in life, even the vanity of life, even the unhappy business of trying to find meaning in this life under the sun, is something that comes from God. As Paul says in Romans 8, it is God who has subjected the creation to futility.

After restating his theme in verse 14, the theme that all is vanity, the Preacher goes on to give two proofs in support of this theme. First, he says, “What is crooked cannot be made straight.” There are crooked things in our lives, the things that make life difficult for us. There are circumstances in our lives that we are not able to alter. There are problems that we face that we simply cannot solve. This is not to say that it is wrong for us to try to straighten out these crooked things by using whatever lawful means are at our disposal. If you have a disease and there is a cure for it, then by all means avail yourself of that cure. But the Preacher is confronting us with the fact that there are limits to what

we can accomplish in in this regard. We cannot straighten out everything. Some things are going to remain crooked, no matter how much we try to straighten them out, and we are going to have live with that crookedness.

Next the Preacher says that “what is lacking cannot be counted.” What he means by this is that there are many instances in which we find ourselves seeking information that we do not have. There are limits to our knowledge. Sometimes, we are unable to discover something for the simple reason that it is not there. A good example of this would be the quest by evolutionary scientists for the missing links in the fossil record, links that would provide tangible evidence in support of Darwinian theory. The reason why those links have not been found is because they are not there. But there are other times when we find ourselves desperately wanting to know something without being able to find it out. There is some information that is unavailable to us because God has chosen to keep it hidden from us.

Both of the examples given in verse 15 remind us of our limits. They tell us that there are things that we cannot fix and that there are things that we cannot discover. Such examples serve to humble us. They remind us that we do not have control over everything. They are examples of how the creation has been subjected to futility because of sin.

In the second part of our passage, beginning in verse 16, the Preacher reminds us again of who he was. He was a great king in Jerusalem, a king whose wisdom far surpassed that of his predecessors. If, as has been traditionally held, the author of

Ecclesiastes was Solomon, then we can see how his words here reflect what the Lord said to Solomon in 1 Kings 3: “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.” [1 Kgs. 3:12] As king over the covenant people, and as the king whom God had promised to give wisdom that exceeded that of all others, the Preacher had every advantage in his quest for meaning.

The Preacher’s emphasis upon his royal identity in this passage has led some interpreters to describe this section of Ecclesiastes as a “royal testament.” Such interpreters point out that this passage bears a strong resemblance to a practice that was found among other kings in the ancient Near East. Kings would often boast of their accomplishments by leaving behind inscriptions and monuments that described what they had achieved during their reign. In this passage, we see the Preacher putting his own ironic twist on this, as he describes the things with which he concerned himself during his reign but then declares such things to be vanity, a striving after the wind. He is boasting about his failure. He was the king who had the most wisdom, even God-given wisdom. If any king was going to accomplish something significant during his reign, we would expect it to be this king. But despite his great wisdom, his quest was unsuccessful.

The Preacher will have more to say about wisdom in the next chapter, but here he is already able to conclude that it too is vanity. And thus we see how the book of Ecclesiastes confronts the project of the Enlightenment, the quest for mastery over nature and perfection in our knowledge. The Preacher shows us that the quest for knowledge

cannot bring satisfaction, because there are simply too many things that we cannot discover or understand. In this present age, this age under the sun, we are doomed to see through a glass darkly.

And for this reason, the Preacher says that the person who increases in knowledge only increases in sorrow. The more we understand about this world, the more we will find that we cannot understand the really significant questions. Now, we should not take the Preacher to be saying that ignorance is bliss. Ignorance is ignorance, and wisdom is clearly to be preferred. The Preacher says as much in the next chapter when he declares, “there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” [2:13-14] Wisdom is better than folly. Nevertheless, there are limits to what wisdom can accomplish. In the end, the person who truly sets out to understand this world and how it works will only have his eyes opened up to see its tragic nature.

We are only three sermons into our study of this book, with eleven chapters still to go. Perhaps you are already starting to get a little irritated with the writer of Ecclesiastes. Why is he so gloomy? Why must he rain on our parade? Why can't he lighten up, at least a little bit? Moreover, we might even begin to wonder why this book is in the Bible in the first place. What good does it do us to hear the Preacher say, over and over again, “all is vanity”?

When we find ourselves asking those kinds of questions, we need to reflect upon the purpose that the Preacher is seeking to achieve in this book. Why would he write a book

like this? Or, to look at it another way, why would God inspire a book like this? I think one answer is that God is trying to shock us. He is trying to get us to wake up from our false perceptions about reality. He is trying to get us to face up to the way things really are, forcing us to take off our rose-colored glasses. This is a technique that is frequently employed in the Bible. We see it often in the prophets and in the book of Revelation. God gave us the book of Ecclesiastes in order to get our attention, in order to get us to open up our eyes. We have a tendency to live in denial, a tendency to believe to be true whatever we wish to be true. But God uses Ecclesiastes to confront us with the tragic realities that pertain to life in a fallen world. It is something like what the writer Flannery O'Connor once said when she was trying to explain why her stories often ended on such stark and shocking notes. She said,

“The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience... [Y]ou have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” [cited in Ralph Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, 9]

Well, that is sort of like what the Lord is doing through the book of Ecclesiastes. He is shouting to those who are hard of hearing. He is putting large and startling images before the eyes of people who are nearly blind. We have to come to see this “under the sun” world as a world that is fallen, a world that has been subjected to futility because of our sin. We have to be brought to the realization that this world, and the life that we live in it, has been ruined by sin. We have to be able to see that the business that the Lord has given us in this life really is, in and of itself, an unhappy business. For this is the only way we will ever come to desire a new life in a new world. As Charles Bridges puts it,

“Thus the Lord will bring thee to thy home, wearied with unsuccessful efforts to seek in thyself or in the world what is only to be found in him.” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 19]