

Fear God and Keep His Commandments Ecclesiastes

Dear Brethren and Sisters, Solomon was given greater wisdom than any other man except the Lord Jesus, and also great power and riches, whereby to put that wisdom into practical effects in doing good. It does not appear that he did this to his own eternal benefit. But in the wise and beneficial providence of God, this combination of opportunity for eternal truth is shown in the three unique and beautiful books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. They are different from each other and from anything else in scripture, and yet they form a very important, yea, an essential part in the great divine revelation to man.

The theme of Ecclesiastes is the vanity and sorrow of all things human and the eternity and beauty of all things divine. It begins by saying, “all is vanity.” It ends with the statement, “Fear God and keep His commandments...for God shall bring every work into judgment, whether it be good, or...evil” (a reward for the wicked and for the righteous).

“All is vanity.” The word means breath, vapor, transitoriness, emptiness, nothingness. It occurs over 30 times in this short book.

Solomon probes to the root of all human endeavor—all labor, all pursuit of wealth or happiness, or satisfaction or accomplishment, and shows that it is all empty mockery. All natural life is a vast, meaningless, frustrating, sorrowful treadmill from nowhere to nowhere. And this is the story, and always has been the story, and always will be the story, of the vast majority of mankind—a sad, gloomy picture.

A natural man does not like Ecclesiastes, for it truly evaluates all his endeavors as stupidity, and forces him to look at stark realities that he desires at all costs to avoid. But like all scripture, Ecclesiastes gives a beautiful and glorious and comforting picture for those who have the wisdom to renounce all natural things and turn exclusively to things that are spiritual.

Verse 1, chapter 1 – “The words of the Preacher” – Preacher is koheleth, and means the caller out, and by implication, the leader and instructor of the assembly called out. Note the English – Ecclesiastes. We are immediately reminded of the word ecclesia, called out ones, and that is correct. The Koheleth is the caller and teacher of the Ecclesia.

Vanity – breath, vapor, passingness – the word is hebel, exactly the same as the name Abel. Why was Abel, the godly second son, called this—a passing vapor? It is a commentary on all human life—these early events, struck down by sin—the seed of the woman bruised by the seed of the serpent. Abel – vanity – passingness. But in the tragedy there is hope. And in the tragedy of all human life that Ecclesiastes lays bare, there is always the golden thread of glorious hope.

Man’s theory is that the race is progressing. Apart from the fact that even if that were true, this would do nothing for the endless streams of individuals who come and go forever, it still just isn’t true. There is no real progress—nothing really new. There is more misery and sorrow and suffering and oppression and conflict in the world today than ever before.

In verses 3-11 of chapter 1, Solomon points out that man’s history, like the natural elements, is purposeless—a vicious circle of unsatisfied desire, round and round, going no where. We must distinguish in Ecclesiastes between that which is natural and that which is spiritual. All Solomon’s comments on vanity refer to the natural man, outside the purpose of God. But this is not his main theme. It is just the background for pointing out the beauty and wisdom of the divine way.

In verses 12-13, he said that he set himself to consider all man’s activities and to see what was their value and where they led. And, he concluded that EVERYTHING was vanity.

First, he considered wisdom—knowledge, learning, study, investigation, delving into the past, into the earth and into the universe. This is in great vogue today. What does it all accomplish for real and eternal good? Nothing—absolutely nothing—nothing can really be changed. It is all just the pitiful chewing on the bars of an inescapable cage, until each captive in turn sinks into death. Wisdom—natural wisdom—mere awareness of the sad realities without being able to do anything about them only, he says in verse 18,

increases sorrow. A cow enroute to the slaughterhouse is quite dumbly and ignorantly content. A man in the same position is in misery. So much for the pursuit for wisdom and knowledge.

What about pleasure and accomplishment? Sensual pleasure—giddy mirth and wine drinking—he dismisses briefly in verse 1-3 of chapter 2. Surely no thoughtful person could think that is the answer to life. And yet it is as far as the vast majority ever get, even in this supposed enlightened age.

Chapter 2, verses 4-11, he says he tried every form of acquisition and self-gratification—vast building projects, beautiful gardens, orchards, lakes, groves—beautiful, ideal surroundings, hosts of servants to fill every whim and desire—silver, gold, cattle, treasures, entertainers, beautiful music. He tried it all, and found it all meaningless and unsatisfying. Happiness and satisfaction constantly eluded him and seemed to mock him.

He could see, verses 12-16, that wisdom was infinitely better than folly, but still it brought no happiness, and it led only to the same still cold grave.

“Therefore (verse 17, chapter 2) I hated life.” I hated all my vast labors for they just mocked the brevity of my life. I must leave everything behind (verse 18). He sums up man’s natural course in verse 23, “For all his days are sorrow...his heart taketh not rest in the night.” He is speaking of the thoughtful man, pursuing the meaning of life. There is no true rest; nothing permanently satisfies.

Verse 24-26, he introduces for the first time the idea of God. He now presents his main theme: All good must be from and in God. Verse 26 – “God giveth.” There is the key. “God giveth to a man that is good in His sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail.” God rigidly controls joy and happiness—it is only for those who are His. To seek it anywhere else, but in Him, is stupidity and madness.

Chapter 3, verses 1-9 – There is a time for everything—surely one of the most ignorantly quoted and misapplied portions of Ecclesiastes. But what does it really mean? It means that the pattern is immutably set by God. It is our wisdom to learn and perceive and conform to that pattern. Every moment of our God-given and God-arranged lives has its duties and opportunities. Wisdom will fit itself into the divine unchangeable pattern. The wisdom of life is to discern the time. Christ condemned his generation, and they destroyed him, their savior, because they did not perceive the divine time.

We must always in prayer be seeking to be guided as to what is the right thing to do right now, in order to be a harmonious productive part of the great divine working—the only work worthwhile. Life is made up of a continuous chain of choices and decisions—wise or unwise—based upon a perception, or a lack of perception, of the divine time.

Verse 11 – “God hath made everything beautiful in his time.” God saw at the beginning that all that He has made was very good. And He will see at the ending that all that He has made is very good. And He perceives that everything in between is very good in the sense that it contributes to the ultimate and eternal perfection. He subjected the creation to vanity in hope. “He hath made everything beautiful in his time.” Here is the assurance that gives peace and happiness in the face of every disappointment and vicissitude of this life.

Verse 14 – “Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever.” All of natural man’s work and activity is a mere meaningless, purposeless treadmill of futility and nothingness, ending in sorrow. Every act of God has a purpose and leads onward to eternal joy. Our wisdom is to become totally and unreservedly a part of that eternal work.

Verse 17 – “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.” This must be post-resurrectional, for he observes elsewhere that the wicked often enjoy long life and die in prosperity, while the righteous often suffer and die in adversity.

Verses 18-20 – Those familiar clear ringing words that man and beast share a common mortality—a short life ending in a return to the dust. What is his point? The same as throughout the book—the utter folly and futility of ALL human ambition and endeavor. At his highest and at his lowest, natural man soon joins the animals in the grave.

Chapter 4, verses 1-3 – He turns his mind to oppression—man’s inhumanity to man—the pattern from the beginning—never more apparent than in this enlightened, so-called, day and age—a further emphasis on the tragedy and vanity of all things human.

Verses 4-8 – All man’s labor is for rivalry and envy. This is how most translators render this. It is a sweeping generalization, but wisdom will perceive it to be true. Most human satisfaction is having or being something better than someone else—a very shallow juvenile motive. How people crave admiration and notoriety and fame and power! But how silly it all is, like squabbling infants in the playpen! Solomon is showing how pitifully foolish are the ways of man.

Verses 9-12 – Solitude and society. Men labor selfishly for themselves and their own. How much better to labor selflessly for the common good. Man alone is a selfish cipher. Man in society begins to have meaning—the divine mutually serving society in God is man’s highest destiny. “How can one be warm alone?” Each at last has his own cold lonely box in the earth.

Verse 13-16 – The doddering old king going down, the bright poor young man coming up—What a commentary on the endless human scene! What does every glory and power and privilege mean, when physical decrepitude makes it all a mockery? But the wheel turns on, and each strong youth in his turn stumbles at last into the same weakness in the grave.

Chapter 5, verses 1-7 – Shallow religiousness—the greatness of God, the smallness of man. Human religiousness is wordy and ostentatious—the babbling sacrifice of fools, as he calls it—religion of the mouth and not of the ear.

Religion is another way man seeks the answer to life. Practically everyone has some sort of religion, even though it be a debased, hopeless, man-made religion, like evolution or atheism, it’s still their religion that they swear by. But how few—how few—give their whole lives to humbly and hungrily seeking the true wisdom that is from above!

Verses 10-17 – He turns to riches—greed, covetousness. The desire to have things beyond the useful necessities of life, is a self-propagating cancer, ever increasing the more it is fed—never satisfied, no satisfaction. Possessions bring problems and not peace. Riches do to man more harm than good and at last all must be left behind. Solomon’s conclusion is the same as Paul’s, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Verses 18-20 – The joy of the righteous. Ecclesiastes does not belittle enjoyment of the natural things of God’s loving providence. Rather, it urgently counsels their full and utter enjoyment in thanksgiving within the pattern of holiness and obedience and a total dedication of life’s labors and possessions to the service of God.

Verse 18 – “It is good and comely to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor.” But it must be the right labor. The fullest enjoyment of every present moment and circumstance is the Ecclesiastes recipe for life, in contrast to the ever-insatiable wandering of the desire. But there will be no true joy in anything unless the life is built solidly and securely upon God.

Verses 19-20 – “Rejoice in his labor,” God answereth him. “God answereth him in the joy of his heart.” There is the secret of it all—oneness with God, God answering, bringing God into the picture in everything, putting oneself by total obedience in the direct channel of God’s love.

Chapter 6 contains further reflections on the vanity of life and the one narrow path of joy. He speaks of things that men put the greatest stock in: Verses 1-2 – Riches and honor. 3-6 – A long life and innumerable progeny—How proud people are of the litters of rabbits that they turn out! But when old age comes and sickness strikes and death awaits, what value are any of these things? The man is worse off, says Solomon, than a stillborn child that never saw light. All the good things left behind only make the end more sad.

Verse 9 – “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire.” That is, better the enjoyment of what we have than the unsatisfied yearning for what we have not and think we want. Happiness consists in totally casting out desire and replacing it with thankful rejoicing. How hard this lesson is to be learned! And yet, how simple it really is! How happy we think we would be, if only we had this or that! Or, this or that would happen! Desire has never wrought true happiness, but only unhappy desire for something else. But contentment with things exactly as they are, because they are as God has

arranged them to be—an inner state of mind beyond the control or disturbance of any outside influence or person—that is an immediate guarantee of happiness and peace. What we have, or can have freely—life itself—the assurance of immortal joy, if we are worthy—the understanding of the scriptures—the revelation of the beauty and goodness of God—the guarantee of his love and care, if we wholly cast ourselves upon Him. All this is so infinitely more valuable and more wonderful than anything we could have in this life, that if we cannot be totally happy with this, then we couldn't be happy with anything. So the problem of happiness is totally within ourselves. Nothing or nobody outside ourselves can either give it or take it away.

Chapter 7, verses 1-12 – He speaks of things that are better, though not in the eyes of natural man. Verse 1 – “A good name is better to be chosen than precious ointment.” Precious ointment stands for all that is naturally pleasing and refreshing and enjoyable and luxurious—the things of the world. The good name that we can bear forever is Yahweh Elohim, by spending our whole life's efforts endeavoring to conform ourselves to the divine pattern that that name represents.

“The day of death is better than the day of birth.” How true! IF the whole life has been spent preparing for future glory!

“To go to the house of mourning is better than to go to the house of feasting.” How contrary to natural desire and inclination! But how much more thought-provoking and character-developing.

Verse 3 – “Sorrow is better than laughter.” Are we not told to always rejoice? Are we not promised continuous joy? Yes, but only in the crucible of present sorrow that develops character and purity and kindness and sympathy and love. “Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” is the godly frame of mind. “The sorrow will pass away with the night, but the rejoicing is forever.”

Verse 8 – “The end is better than the beginning,” but only for the chosen of God. Here is the glory of the contrast with the natural animal life of mankind.

“Patience is better than pride.” Pride comes naturally. It's built-in—part of the standard equipment. And it is the greatest enemy of peace—peace within ourselves, or peace with anyone else. It is touchy and self-centered, apprehensive of any slight or loss of face. Patience is its total opposite—a spiritual fruit developed by years of self-searching and self-discipline.

Verse 16 – “Be not righteous over much.”—Another badly abused and misapplied scripture by many who would not have the faintest idea where to even find it in the Bible. It certainly does not mean, “Be careful not to be too righteous.” For God has said, “Be ye perfect, even as I am perfect.” That is the standard “Be ye holy, even as I am holy.” “Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord.” What then does it mean? There are two things in relation to righteousness against which we are repeatedly warned. One – self-righteousness—assumption of righteousness, pretension or proud display of supposed righteousness. And, two – setting up our righteousness against God's—presuming to question His way and His righteousness. It could mean either of these; they are both very common errors. In view of the context, it is most likely the latter—presuming to question God. This fits better with the stern warning. “Why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” And it corresponds with verse 13-15, “Consider the work of God: For who can make that straight which He hath made crooked?” So many think they can. Many (observing the injustices that Solomon describes in verse 15: the just perishing and the wicked living long in wickedness) have presumed to question God's righteousness, thereby making themselves over righteous—more righteous than God. To complain about anything, even the weather, is to presumptuously set our wisdom and righteousness as greater than God's—to presume that we know or would do better than He.

Chapter 8 begins by telling us that “a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine.” This has both a present and a future application. To shine is to reflect glory, as in II Cor. 3:18, “With unveiled face, reflecting in a mirror the glory of the Lord.” The comparison there is to the shining of Moses' face from having been in the presence of God. There is a striking parallel in Acts—the shining of Stephen's face.

The basic theme of the book comes out again in verses 12-13 – Though sinners sin repeatedly and live long, yet he says, “Surely I know it shall be well with them that fear God...but it shall not be well with the wicked.” The wicked are all outside the purpose of God. It shall not be well with them. Regardless of present circumstances and appearances, faith knows that at last righteousness will be rewarded and wickedness punished, and therefore, is content to wait in patience.

Verses 15-17 condemn the inquisitive restlessness of man, especially modern man, to probe all the secrets of the universe, when he should be, as in verse 15, giving himself to the simple thankful enjoyment of God's blessings, and the fulfillment of the labor that God has put in his hand, to serve God practically and prepare himself for eternity. Mirth and merry in verse 15 give the wrong idea. They have changed in meaning since King James' day. It should be gladness and glad, as in the Rotherham translation. It is so translated in other parts of scripture. It can refer either to religious or to worldly gladness. Here, it is gladness in God.

Chapter 9 further enforces this same lesson of wisdom. Life and opportunity are very short. Death is forever, for those who have not seized upon that opportunity. Therefore, do with all your might that which will gain you acceptance with God. Waste time on nothing else.

Chapter 10 begins with a statement that is so obvious and so often tragically illustrated, and yet which we so easily forget to our embarrassment and shame. A tiny leaven of momentary folly can destroy a long and constructive labor of wisdom. A foolish word can demolish the power of many words of wisdom. We should never allow ourselves to lapse into folly. Some slips are never forgotten and their damage never ends.

Chapter 11 tells us to labor steadily, at all times and under all circumstances, not hunting for excuses or waiting for more favorable opportunities. Our duty is to work, continuously and consistently, leaving the results to God and not watching the skies for rain or wind to justify postponement or cancellation. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand." The morning is youth, who tend to say, "Let us play. Our turn to work will come." The evening is old age, which tend to say, "We have done our part. Now it is someone else's turn." Both reactions are disobedience and folly. God calls us from early morning, when strength and vigor abound, to latest evening, the years of long experience and study, until our little day ends at last in God-given rest. There in so retirement on the way to eternal life.

The rest of chapter 11 and chapter 12 speak of these two extremes of life. Chapter 11, verse 9 – "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee...and walk in the ways of thine heart...but know thou that for all this God will bring thee into judgment." This is not irony; it is on a higher plain than that. It is a true exhortation to rejoice in youthful strength—get every possible happiness out of the glorious morning of life. BUT, be sure that it is a godly, constructive, obedient happiness—the only true happiness that will lead to life eternal. Therefore, chapter 12, verse 1 – "Remember (never forget) thy Creator in the days of thy youth." Keep Him in mind—all day and every day.

The rest of chapter 12 is a beautiful figure of old age and death, which can be glorious and joyful and need not at all be sad, IF it is the crowning glory of a life of love and obedience. Finally, verse 13 – "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole man." Duty is wrongly inserted. This is man in his divinely intended totality. Nothing short of this is true man at all in God's sight; it's an animal. Christ—the one real man—is the example.

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