

Vain Repetition

June 23, 2013 ~ Ecclesiastes 1.1-2.23

What is the Purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes?

- ❖ Solomon wrote 3 books of the Bible (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*)
 - ✧ Song of Solomon on love & commitment ~ Proverbs on wisdom for living
 - ✧ Readers of Ecclesiastes can sense that it's profound / but not grasp why
- ❖ In this book Solomon dares to ask the question "Why?"
 - ✧ "Why does man exist?" / "What is the purpose of man?" (*theoretical / philosophical*)
 - ✧ "Why do I exist?" / "What is my purpose?" (*practical / meaningful*)
 - ✧ As a teen I regarded this question as "my little secret" / nobody else seemed to care
 - ◆ !!!: My younger sister Bridgot died at 11 (*I was 13*) / This question very real
 - ✧ But to ask the question seemed wrong / offensive / arrogant
 - ◆ "Who was I to ask such a profound question of my elders?"
- ❖ Westminster Catechism #1: "What is the chief end of man?"
 - ✧ "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."
 - ✧ "Why does man exist?" / "Man exists to please God and to enjoy Him forever."
 - ✧ "Why do I exist?" / "I exist to please God and to enjoy Him forever."

Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries

- ❖ Few preachers go through **Ecc**: Mark Driscoll (*Mars Hill*) and David Fairfield (*Kaleo*)
- ❖ "This book is . . . one which no one has ever completely mastered. Indeed, it has been so distorted by the miserable commentaries of many writers that it is almost a bigger job to purify and defend the author from the notions which they have smuggled into him than it is to show his real meaning." ~ Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 1532
- ❖ "[Ecclesiastes] reminds me of the remains of a daring explorer, who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin." ~ Paul Haupt, 'The Book of Ecclesiastes', 1894
- ❖ "He is an uncompromising pessimist, who sees the world as it is. Everything that seems pleasant or profitable is vanity and a grasping of wind; there is nothing positive but pain, nothing real but the eternal Will, which is certainly unknowable and probably unconscious. These truths . . . are the bitter fruits of that rare knowledge, the increase of which is the increase of sorrow." ~ E. J. Dillon, *The Sceptics of the Old Testament* (1895: 113)

- ❖ “Inasmuch as it would be absurd to criticize a Rubik’s Cube for the problems it presents to its user, so it is with the text of Ecclesiastes.” ~ Gary Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric* (2001: 147)
- ❖ “The Book of Ecclesiastes has been called skeptical, epicurean; it is certainly without the glow and hope which animate the Bible in general.” ~ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, 1873
- ❖ “. . . the Book of Ecclesiastes [is] one of the wisest and one of the worst understood books in the Bible.” ~ Matthew Arnold, *A Speech at Eton*, 1879
- ❖ “He is a pathological doubter of everything, stemming from a drastic emotional experience, a psychic disturbance. He is doubtful about himself as a person of worth and character. He has no self-esteem or value of himself. His doubt has destroyed all values. He is an inferior, of no account, and he demeans himself constantly. His doubts come from a parapathy, a disease of the mind which he shares with many neurotics.” ~ Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (1973: 8)
- ❖ Some see Solomon (*or writer of Ecc*) as jaded and world weary
 - ✧ He is bitter at times (**Ecc 1.13** “burdensome task”, **Ecc 2.17** “hated life”)
 - ✧ So they read his words in **8.15** as self-centered despairing
 - ◆ “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (**Is 22.13**, **1 Cor 15.32**)
- ❖ For this reason many writers wrestle with finding Ecclesiastes useful

So what is the Usefulness of the Book of Ecclesiastes?

- ❖ It is among my favorite books of the Bible
 - ✧ It grounds you in a way that few other books of the Bible can . . .
 - ✧ It repeatedly rips the worldly crutches out from under our arms . . .
 - ◆ We must stand by faith upon God and His Word / This book helps us
- ❖ One sentence summary of intent:
 - ✧ “A man’s got to know his limitations” ~ Clint Eastwood in “The *Outlaw Josey Wales*”
 - ✧ Ecclesiastes consists of 2 parts nearly identical in size & similar in design
 1. “Man is limited in ability”
 2. “Man is limited in knowledge”
 - ◆ Central verse **6.10** “.. man .. cannot contend with Him who is mightier than He.”
 - ✧ Man, being chafed by these 2 limitations, is key to understanding Ecclesiastes

Xition: Let’s start by looking at its most famous line . . .

1.2 & 12.8 ~ “Vanity of vanities . . .”

- ❖ These words start a poem that runs for 10 verses in **ch 1 (2-11)**
- ❖ They also end another poem of 8 verses in the last chapter (**12.1-8**)
- ❖ Each poem is followed by an explanation
 - ✧ The first from **1.12-18** explains the experiment that led to creation of the poem
 - ✧ The second from **12.9-14** explains the lesson learned from the experiment
- ❖ These words are very negative – very dark – and they’re meant to be . . .
 - ✧ But they’re spoken as an indictment of people who live life forgetful of God
 - ✧ They’re spoken concerning the flesh and of those that value only the flesh

v3 ~ “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?”

- ❖ Several of these words or phrases will be seen again and again through the book
 - ✧ profit appears 7 or 8 times
 - ✧ labor and/or toil appears in 26 verses
 - ✧ “under the sun” appears in 27 verses (*1/3 are in today’s text*)
- ❖ While “under the sun” appears so many times, “under heaven” appears only twice
 - ✧ Later we’ll see the great significance in this little difference

v4 to 7 ~ Cycles Apparent in Nature

- ❖ Generation introduced as a way to tell passage of time ~ no emphasis upon man
 - ✧ **v4** ~ “earth abides forever” (*by comparison to a mere man*)
 - ✧ **v5** ~ “the sun also rises, and the sun goes down”
 - ✧ **v6** ~ “the wind whirls about continually”
 - ✧ **v7** ~ “all rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full”
 - ✧ Earth / Sun / Wind / Fire ~ 4 elements forming the essence of Paganism
- ❖ Solomon sees himself as insignificant by comparison

v8 to 11 ~ Cycles Apparent in Man’s Experience & History

- ❖ **v8a** ~ The necessity for labor is everywhere and in everything
- ❖ **v8b** ~ But neither eye nor ear is ever fully satisfied / man appears insatiable
- ❖ **v9** ~ Everything cycles from day to day / week to week / year to year
- ❖ **v10** ~ Nothing is really new, because ultimately . . .
- ❖ **v11** ~ Each person / each generation fades away / and it’s as if nothing happened

Xition: So ends the poem that gives the results of Solomon’s experiment

The Experiment Summarized

- ❖ **v13** ~ “I set my heart to seek .. out .. all that is done under heaven”
 - ✧ Solomon’s purpose is to determine man’s purpose / to answer “why”
 - ✧ Though a scientist, he reveals his emotions / “burdensome task”
- ❖ **v14** ~ He states a dark conclusion / “all is vanity and grasping for the wind”
 - ✧ But note he now uses the phrase “under the sun”
- ❖ Some see these 2 phrases as synonymous but I don’t
 - ✧ Solomon uses “under heaven” only twice in **1.13** and **2.3**
 - ✧ Yet he uses “under the sun” throughout the book (*27 times*)
- ❖ In **v15** he summarizes the two inabilities of man he’ll expound throughout the book
 1. “what is crooked cannot be straightened” / man limited in ability
 2. “what is lacking cannot be numbered” / man limited in knowledge

Solomon Drills Many Dry Holes

1. **2.1-3, 8** ~ Enjoyed drink & entertainment “wine, laughter, singers, music”
 2. **2.4-6** ~ Made “great works, houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards, pools”
 3. **2.7-8** ~ Acquired “servants, herds & flocks, silver & gold, special treasure of kings”
- ❖ **2.9-11** ~ But he recognizes all of this as “vanity and grasping for the wind”
 - 4. **2.12-16** ~ He pursued wisdom for its own sake (knowledge)

Solomon Especially Embittered by Unappreciated Labor

- ❖ **2.17** ~ “Therefore I hated life ~ work was distressing to me . . .”
 - ✧ Because “all is vanity and grasping for the wind”
- ❖ **2.18** ~ “Then I hated all my labor” ~ Now he comes to hate his works
 - ✧ houses, orchards, pools, vineyards, gardens . . .
- ❖ **2.20** ~ “I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor”
 - ✧ He had set his heart upon his work / (*i.e., he loved it*)
 - ✧ The dry holes he’s drilled lead him to despair
- ❖ **Read 2.21** ~ Solomon especially despised passing heritage on to fools / lazy
 - ✧ His son Rehoboam did not have his wisdom, his energy, his ability
 - ✧ Even God’s gift of wisdom to him was made bittersweet because of this
 - ◆ !!!: Phenomenon – starring John Travolta
 - ✧ Solomon had no choice but to pass heritage on to someone he deemed unfit

Xition: We’ve accounted for 41 verses today... But we could have spent weeks on it...

Solomon's Lesson to All

- ❖ Ecclesiastes speaks to the believer as well as the unbeliever
 - ✧ It's not only unbelievers that need to wrestle with the question "Why?"
- ❖ Solomon was a king of Israel / a nation in covenant with God
- ❖ God met with him directly / God's Spirit filled the Temple and drove them out
- ❖ Yet . . .
 - ✧ He carried out this experiment and excluded God
 - ✧ The experiment was to be conducted "under heaven" (**Read 2.3**)
 - ✧ But he carried it out "under the sun" (*9 times in our 41 verses*)
 - ✧ Solomon was embittered by his inability to DO and to KNOW more . . .
 - ◆ And then is no end to that word (more)
 - ✧ Solomon was faced with the limitations of being a creature
 - ✧ He believed he would be happier if he were God

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,

And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,

To God our Savior, who alone is wise,

Be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever.

Amen

pause

Go in peace . . .