

Ecclesiastes

June 16, 2011

When I was in junior high in Seoul, South Korea, there was one particular American pop-song that got my attention because of the lyrics although I didn't understand everything. It was "Turn! Turn! Turn!" by the Byrds. It was very popular during that time. Little did I know that the entire lyrics with the exception of the six words at the end of the song was taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

This Book of Ecclesiastes can be seen as a cynical rambling Book of an old twisted man who had it all. I believe that the Lord has a great lesson to learn from this Book for us.

Since Jerry Hamby taught this Book previously, I am not going to go through this verse by verse, rather in one sweep of bird-eye view. Yes, we are going to finish this Book tonight, the Lord willing.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

The title of the book comes from the writer's identification of himself as "the Preacher" in v1.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew word, 'Qoheleth', means "one who addresses an assembly." The Septuagint's title, 'Ekklesiastes', echoed that meaning and eventually yielded our English title, 'Ecclesiastes'.

Although no specific names or dates appear in the Book, evidence suggests that Solomon was its author. The writer identifies himself as a son of David and as a king in v1 and 12. He also speaks of his vast wisdom, pursuit of pleasure, accomplishments, and wealth. Solomon certainly would have fit these descriptions.

Some have interpreted Solomon's writing as the product of a midlife crisis. It's probable, though, that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life as he reflected on all his accomplishments and failures while he wrote the Book of Proverbs when he was much younger.

The time line is around 970-930 B.C.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

The word 'vanity' appears 29 times in this Book (NKJV) to express the many things that cannot be understood about life. All earthly goals and ambitions when pursued as ends in themselves lead to dissatisfaction and frustration.

This focus has led some to interpret Ecclesiastes as pessimistic or skeptical. But such is not the case. The Book also develops the positive theme of overcoming the vanities of life by fearing a God who is good, just, and sovereign. Ecclesiastes deals with the futility of trying to live and enjoy life apart from God.

The Book in some ways parallels the Book of Job. Where Job emphasizes God's sovereignty in suffering that seems senseless, Ecclesiastes shows His purpose in a life that seems meaningless.

C. ONE THING WE MUST NOTICE BEFORE WE START

Ecclesiastes is the most secular of all Bible Books. If I were to speak to audiences made up of unbelievers of Jesus Christ, and I were asked to select a Book in the Bible on which to speak, Ecclesiastes would be my choice. Because it hits people right where they live, at the level they live and think. It speaks to a world trying to find its way without God. It speaks to people looking for meaning – but looking in all the wrong places.

King Solomon did everything he desired, yet he was empty. He may not have done the exact same things that the 21st Century people are doing, but in essence, he had been there, done that, bought the t-shirt and even wrote a book about it.

D. INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

The Hebrew word for 'vanity' is 'hebel' and it means 'vapor'. It also refers to that which is "without real substance, value, permanence, significance, or meaning." So what things qualify as "vanity"?

Ecclesiastes 1:9b And there is nothing new under the sun.

All things under the sun away from God, according to the context of the Book, reveals as 'vanity'.

E. INVESTIGATION AND DISCOVERIES

In the largest section of the Book, Solomon provides more illustrations of futility, this time from his own experience as king over Israel in Jerusalem. "You want to see vanity?" he asks, then he points himself, "Take a long look at my empty life."

From v1-9 of chapter 2, we find the list of things Solomon had tried – wine, construction projects, agricultural projects, many servants, ranches, riches, entertainment, sex, and wisdom. Yet he didn't find any lasting value in those.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

Many people strive to achieve their goals, but my question is, "What did it cost to achieve it? Was it by using deception and betrayal? By abandoning their principles and sacrificing integrity? By neglecting their family and friends? By forgetting about, and in some cases, outright abandoning God?" If so, they may be successful by certain definitions, but ultimately, they're failures.

We can do worse than fail. We can succeed and be personally proud of our success. We can succeed and worship the accomplishment rather the One who helped us to reach it. We can succeed and forget whose hand it is that gives and withholds.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

To everything there is a season, its own time. Unless our God intervenes and directs us to do His work, whatever we do becomes meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-14 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, 13 and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor--it is the gift of God. 14 I know that whatever

God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.

Just as Job discovered that there is a good God behind seemingly senseless suffering, Solomon discovered that there is a purposeful God behind the seemingly meaningless flow of life.

In chapter 4, Solomon begins to examine the whole range of social relationships. Oppression, competition, isolation, and advancement – all are vanity and striving after the wind. Even our relationship with God is meaningless if it is limited to lip service and thoughtless religion.

I strongly believe that Solomon was lonely even though he was surrounded by hundreds and thousands of people – over 700 wives and 300 concubines which they themselves gave him massive headaches, because they were not of God. I believe that is why he wrote this portion:

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. 11 Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

I used this portion of the Scriptures to illustrate how husband and wife should be together with the Lord Jesus Christ whenever I did weddings.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.

Whether you have power, wealth, fame, popularity and others, none of them matters without God. There are many rich people who are godly and they have right perspective. They use their wealth to expend the Kingdom of God and are blessed.

At the same time there are many not-so-wealthy people who love money and want to be rich at any cost. That is what we call 'greed'. Money itself does not ruin people, rather the love of money does. I said this before, "Money makes a wonderful servant, but it makes a horrible master."

Ecclesiastes 6:7 All the labor of man is for his mouth, And yet the soul is not satisfied.

If the material world satisfies people, the most content people would be the richest people in the world. But they are not. Many of them, if the truth be told, are plain miserable and never content. Just like that rich young ruler who came to Jesus to find how to inherit the eternal life in Mark 10.

If you feed your flesh, your soul never will be satisfied, only your flesh will temporarily, and then you will crave more. But if you feed your soul, exercise your soul, care for your soul, then it will become stronger and be uppermost in your life.

Chapter 7 has a very close similarity with the Book of Proverbs in giving practical advices.

Chapter 8 describes the vanity of what Solomon sees. How unfair life seems to him when wicked people prosper and godly people get the shaft, so to speak, when there is injustice.

Chapter 9 and 10 continues the theme of rain and sunshine falling on the godly and the ungodly alike. Basically Solomon says, "I have noticed something, life is not fair." Certainly not always fair, and there is an unpredictability of life. You could be here one moment, and gone the next. There is no advance warning.

F. ADMONITION

Seeing life as an opportunity to live wisely or foolishly, Solomon exhorts youth to enjoy life as a gift from God while they are young in 11:7-12:1. Old age can be a dark and dismal time according to 12:2-8, so the sooner we learn to walk with God and enjoy Him, the better.

G. SUMMARY

If we overlook these final few verses of the Book, we will miss both the source and substance of Solomon's message. His reflections have not been the empty musings of earthly wisdom.

Someone has said that life is like a school, except that sometimes you don't know what the lessons are until you have failed the examination. God teaches us primarily from His Word; but He also teaches us through creation, history, and the various experiences of life. Solomon explained the characteristics of his own work as a teacher of God's truth.

Ecclesiastes 12:11 The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.

Solomon claimed that his words were inspired, given by God, the One Shepherd in v11. Inspiration was the special miracle ministry of the Holy Spirit that enabled men of God to write the Word of God as God wanted it written, complete and without error.

Next two verses sum up the entire Book:

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.

This is the purpose of life. Fear God and obey His commandments. Anything other than those, we are wasting away our lives in useless and meaningless things.

H. APPLICATIONS

1) Fear God.

Anyone who thinks that we don't have to fear God is an ignorant person. Of course, the fear is awe of His holiness.

2) Obey God's commandments.

God's commandments from the OT and NT are there for our own benefits.

3) Prepare to give an account.

The believers of Jesus Christ will give their accounts to the Lord in heaven for their rewards. But the unbelievers will give their accounts at the Great White Throne Judgment. Not a good place to be.

