

January 1, 2017

“Everything is Meaningless”

Focal Passage: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 (NASB)

Cross References: 1 Kings 3:5-28; 4:29-34; Job 38:1-11; Psalm 39:5, 6; 62:9; 104:5; 119:90; 144:4; Mark 8:36

Lesson Idea: If we don't center our lives around God, we will find it all to be meaningless.

BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

Dec 25 2 John-Jude	Dec 26 Rev 1-3
Dec 27 Rev 4-8	Dec 28 Rev 9-12
Dec 29 Rev 13-16	Dec 30 Rev 17-19
Dec 31 Rev 20-22	Jan 1 Genesis 1-3

Background:

NOTES: from David Guzik, *Ecclesiastes* (there are more of his Introductory notes at the conclusion of this lesson)

The words of the Preacher: The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most unusual and perhaps most difficult to understand books of the Bible. It has a spirit of hopeless despair; it has no praise or peace; it seems to promote questionable conduct. Yet these words of the Preacher show us the futility and foolishness of a life lived without an eternal perspective.

The question in Ecclesiastes isn't about the existence of God; the author is no atheist, and God is always there. The question is whether or not God matters. The answer to that question is vitally connected to a responsibility to God that goes beyond this earthly life. . .

In the search for this answer, the Preacher will search the depths of human experience, including despair. He will thoroughly examine the emptiness and futility of life lived without eternity before coming to the conclusion of the necessity of eternity. . .

“What, then, is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.” (Eaton)

. . . “Ecclesiastes does not pretend to preach the Gospel. Rather, it encourages the reader to a God-centered worldview rather than falling victim to frustrations and unanswered questions. None of its contents has to be rejected in the light of the New Testament.” (Wright)

These are definitely the words of the Preacher, but in this apologetically oriented sermon his focus on God is indirect. “It makes no mention of Yahweh, the Lord, the name of the God of Israel’s covenant faith. It scarcely refers to the law of God, the only possible reference being in Ecclesiastes 12:13. It scarcely refers to the nation of Israel (only in Ecclesiastes 1:12). Why these omissions? The answer seems to be that the Preacher’s argument stands on its own feet and does not depend on Israel’s covenant faith to be valid. He is appealing to universally observable facts.” (Eaton)

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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

*2 “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher,
“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”*

*3 What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?*

*4 A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.*

*5 Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again.*

*6 Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.*

*7 All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.*

*To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.*

*8 All things are wearisome;
Man is not able to tell it.*

*The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.*

*9 That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.*

*So there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there anything of which one might say,
“See this, it is new”?*

*Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.*

*11 There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.*

DISCUSSION:

- V 1. How do the names in v 1 serve as fitting descriptions for Solomon?

NOTE: from Guzik:

The son of David: This identifies the Preacher as David's son Solomon. Some believe that another wrote it in Solomon's name, but there is no compelling reason to say that anyone other than Solomon wrote it. . . . In a sense, only Solomon could write this book. He had both the wisdom and the resources to work through these problems. . .

The Puritan commentator John Trapp wrote what some other also believe, that Ecclesiastes was Solomon's statement of error and penance, and evidence that he turned back to God at the end of his life – despite the absence of such assurance in 1 Kings 11:1-43. "He penned this penitential sermon, grown an old man, he had experimented all this that he here affirmeth, so that he might better begin his speech to his scholars." (Trapp)

- v 2. Explain the phrase: "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" (see Psalm 39:5, 6; 62:9; 144:4)

NOTE: (Guzik)

This phrase (or something quite like it) will be used about 30 times in this short book. It is one of the major themes of Ecclesiastes.

All is vanity: To further strengthen the point, Solomon noted not only that life is vanity, but that all is vanity. It seemed that every part of life suffered from this emptiness.

We see from the first two verses that Solomon wrote this from a certain perspective, a perspective that through the book he will expose and inadequate and wrong. Most all of Ecclesiastes is written from this perspective, through the eyes of a man who thinks and lives as if God doesn't matter.

- v 3-7. How do these verses point to how repetitious life becomes, and why does that produce hopelessness in men?

NOTE: (Guzik)

What profit has a man from all his labor: Using the language from the world of business, the Preacher asked a worthy question. He knew that life was filled with labor – but what is it worth? What does it profit?

Profit: "A commercial term; life 'pays no dividends'." (Eaton)

Jesus expressed a similar though in Mark 8:36: For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

- v 4-5. How do these verses contrast the shortness of people's lives with the permanence of nature? (see Psalm 104:5; 119:90)

NOTE: (Guzik)

The sun also rises . . . The wind goes toward the south . . . the rivers run into the sea: From what Solomon could observe under the sun, these unchanging cycles expressed the unchanging monotony of life, leading to its vanity and meaninglessness.

"For Old Testament orthodoxy, creation rings with the praises of the Lord. Creation is his. . . . But, says the Preacher, take away its God, and creation no longer reflects his glory; it illustrates the weariness of mankind." (Eaton)

- v 7. How does this verse reflect the awesome nature of God's creative work? (see Job 38:1-11)
- v 8. Why are all things wearisome? Why do our eyes and ears never get full?
- v 9-10. How have you seen the truth of this verse? What things have happened this past year that were new in your life? How have even these things been true of others in the past?

NOTE: (Guzik)

There may be nothing new under the sun; but thankfully the followers of Jesus – those born again by God's Spirit – don't live under the sun in that sense. Their life is filled with new things.

· A new name (Isaiah 62:2, Revelation 2:17); A new community (Ephesians 2:14); A new help from angels (Psalms 91:11); A new commandment (John 13:34); A new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33, Matthew 26:28); A new and living way to heaven (Hebrews 10:20); A new purity (1 Corinthians 5:7); A new nature (Ephesians 4:24); A new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17); All things become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17, Revelation 21:5)

- v 11. How does this verse show the futility of people trying to make a name for themselves in this life?

NOTE: (Guzik)

All things are full of labor; man cannot express it: Solomon then observed that the meaningless of life wasn't only reflected in nature. It was also evident in human effort and endeavor. Despite all man's working (labor), seeing, and hearing, he is still not satisfied.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

12 I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. 14 I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. 18 Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

DISCUSSION:

- v 12-13. Why would Solomon have been the person best suited to begin an exploration of wisdom? Why would he regard the pursuit of wisdom as a "grievous task?" According to James 1:5 how should we seek wisdom today?

NOTE (Guzik)

Solomon's great wisdom was a gift of God. When God offered him whatever he pleased, he asked for wisdom, especially the wisdom to lead the people of God (1 Kings 3:5-28). Therefore God made Solomon so wise that he wrote thousands of proverbs, and he was considered to be wiser than all men of his day (1 Kings 4:29-34).

I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven: With the unique ability to make such a search, Solomon looked for the answers in wisdom – by which he meant human wisdom that excluded answers in the light of eternity. . .

In other places in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is thought of as a blessing – as it is; even wisdom that excludes eternity (Ecclesiastes 7:11-12; Ecclesiastes 7:19). Yet this kind of under the sun wisdom can't answer the vanity and meaninglessness of life. . .

This burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised: The seeming futility of life comes from God; He has given it to man. God has deliberately built a system where life seems meaningless and vanity without the understanding of a living, active God to whom we must give account.

It may seem cruel of God to devise such a system, but it actually evidence of His great love and mercy. He built

within us the desire and need for that which brings meaning and fulfillment to live. As Augustine wrote, the Creator made a God-shaped space in each of us, which can only be filled with Him.

This is true not only of us as people, but also as creation. God also subjected creation to this futility until He one day brings the promised fulfillment. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope (Romans 8:20).

At the same time, this is a burdensome task. It isn't always easy to find these answers, because our pride, self-reliance, and self-love work against finding them.

- v 14. Why would he regard all man's works to be "vanity and striving after wind?" How does this seem true in our society today?
- v 15. What principle is being taught in this verse?
- v 16. Although this verse sounds like he is boasting; how does it really just show his credentials for writing as an expert on the subject of life?

NOTE: (Guzik)

I communed with my heart: This is natural for anyone who looks for the answers under the sun, apart from an eternal perspective. They look inward for wisdom and answers, instead of to the God who rules eternity.

- v 17-18. Why did he set his mind to know "madness and folly" as well as wisdom? What did he discover about them?
- v 18. How can increasing in wisdom and knowledge bring more grief and pain? If this is true, should we seek to increase in wisdom and knowledge? Why or why not?

APPLICATION:

- ✓ How do you deal with the weariness and repetition of life?
- ✓ Have there been times in your life that you tried to live without God and found no satisfaction? Why?
- ✓ How is Godly wisdom reflected in your life? How does it bring encouragement instead of the frustration that Solomon experienced?

Introduction to Ecclesiastes from David Guzik

Our Sunday School lessons for 2017 will begin in Ecclesiastes. Here are some introductory remarks from David Guzik.

Background:

Book Overview - *Ecclesiastes*

Name. The Hebrew word means preacher and refers to or signifies one who calls together and addresses assemblies.

The Personal or Human Element. Such expressions as "I perceived," "I said in my heart," "I saw," etc., indicate that it is not the will of God that is developed but a man is telling of his own ventures and utter failure.

General View. The General View or Key-phrase is "under the sun," with the sad refrain, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity", and shows how a man under the best possible conditions sought for joy and peace, trying at its best every human resource. He had the best that could be gotten, from human wisdom, from wealth, from worldly pleasure, from worldly honor, only to find that all was "vanity and vexation of spirit." It is what a man, with the knowledge of a holy God, and that He will bring all into judgment, has learned of the emptiness of things "under the sun" and of the whole duty of man to "fear God and keep his commandments."

Purpose of the Book. The purpose, then, is not to express the doubts or skepticism of the writer, not to record the complaining of a bitter spirit. It is not the story of a pessimist or of an evil man turned moralist. But it is intended to show that, if one should realize all the aims, hopes and aspirations of life, they would not bring satisfaction to the heart. His experience is used to show the result of successful worldliness and self-gratification in

contrast with the outcome of the higher wisdom of the Godly life. We are shown that man was not made for this world alone and not for selfish achievement or gratification, but to fulfill some great plan of God for him which he will accomplish through obedience and Divine service.

The Date and Authorship. The opening verse and certain other passages such as some of the conditions as well as the characters of the persons represented in the book give the impression that Solomon wrote it, but there are other evidences that point to some other author. Neither the author nor the date of writing has been definitely determined.

Analysis.

- The Vanities of Life. Chs. 1-4. seen in both experience and observation.
 - The Vanity of what he has experienced, Chs. 1-2.
 - The Vanity of what he has observed, Chs. 3-4.
- Practical Wisdom, Chs. 5-7.
 - Some prudential maxims, Chs. 5.
 - Some Vanities, Ch. 6.
 - The best way to get along in life, Ch. 7.
- Rules for a Happy Life, Chs. 8-11.
- Conclusion of the Whole Matter, Ch. 13.

For Study and Discussion.

- (1) Make a list of all the different things enumerated as a failure or vanity.
- (2) Make a list of the different things coming to us as God's gift of providence.
- (3) Make a list of prudential maxims or rules which teach how to live rightly and to lift us above the tribulations and defeat of life.
- (4) Does the author think seeking pleasure is the real business of life?
- (5) Does he deny the value of altruistic service?

(6) Does he believe in the future life and in future rewards?

NOTES: from David Guzik, *Ecclesiastes*