

Ecclesiastes

Our daily Bible readings (from the Bible Companion reading planner) bring us to consider the book of Ecclesiastes. For the basis of our exhortation today, we shall therefore consider some of the main themes of this book.

There is some discussion as to who the human penman was that wrote these inspired words. We believe, for the reasons that follow, that it was none other than King Solomon – even though we find that Solomon did turn away from Yahweh in his old age:

“For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with Yahweh his God, as was the heart of David his father” (1 Kin. 11:4).

It is sometimes suggested then, that as the book of Ecclesiastes was evidently written at the end of the writer’s life, that it could not have been Solomon, for in his old age, he turned away. However, there is a weight of evidence to suggest that the writer was Solomon, which would mean that although he turned away in his old age, in his final days he turned back again to the Lord which appeared to him.

The opening words indicate that the writer was a son of King David:

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1).

Moreover this son of David reigned over the whole house of Israel, not Judah only:

“I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:12).

This description can only refer to Solomon the son of David, as after his reign, the kingdom was divided into Israel and Judah, and no one king reigned over them both.

Ecclesiastes 1 also speaks of the writer’s wisdom:

“I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly ...” (Eccl. 1:17).

This again, would match Solomon, who was given the gift of Wisdom. Also, the writer was very prosperous in this world’s goods:

“I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits ... So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.” (see Eccl. 2:3-10).

And of Solomon it is written that:

“Yahweh magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel” (1 Chron. 29:25).

But whoever was the penman, the point is that these words from part of the Inspired Word of God, and should be viewed in that way. The main theme of the book, is that all life is vanity without God. So we read:

VANITY WITHOUT GOD

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2).

And again:

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 1:14).

As the Apostle declared, “... when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but **became vain** in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

Becoming “vain” therefore, is something that happens to those who do not glorify the Father, and their hearts become foolish and darkened.

Chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes described how the writer indulged in all kinds of pleasures:

“Whatsoever **mine eyes desired** I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour ...” (Eccl. 2:10)

Yet he concluded that:

“then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do, and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (Ecc. 2:11).

This theme continues through to the New Testament. John describes the transient nature of human pleasure:

“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, **and the lust of the eyes**, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 Jno. 2:16-17).

The Preacher indulged in whatsoever his eyes desired, but at the end, recognised that the lust of the eyes was to no profit, being vanity and vexation of spirit. In a related aspect, the writer continues to describe how that it is better to be thankful for the things that we have, rather than to crave more and more:

“Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 6:9).

To be drawn away by the lust of the eyes is the process of temptation described by James (Jas 1:14), and is an experience shared by all men: “every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed ...” (Jas. 1:14).

The opening chapters of the book emphasise the vanity of how all things are full of labour, whether good or bad:

“All things are full of labour; men cannot utter it ...” (Eccl. 1:8, see also chapter 2)

This brings us back to the changed circumstances following the fall of man from a position of favour:

“in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground ... “ (Gen. 3 see verses 17-24).

This is the primary focus of many: labouring to obtain food, raiment and shelter. These are the main things that men seek after – but for the faithful followers of Messiah, things are different. Yes, they still have to engage themselves in labour to support themselves and their families, but that is not their primary focus: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (Mat. 6:33) is the exhortation of the Master. Rather than to seek to obtain as much of this world’s goods as possible, it is better to have less – with hope:

“better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:6).

The same spirit is seen in the Proverbs:

“Better is little with the fear of Yahweh than great treasure and trouble therewith” (Prov. 15:16).

To accrue wealth which is not used up is also a vanity:

“Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man, or a fool? Yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity” (Eccl. 2:18-19).

If Solomon is the writer of these words, then the application of them would appear to be to Rehoboam, who was not a wise king.

THE TRUE NATURE OF MAN

All things without God being vanity, without Him “every man at his best state is altogether vanity” (Psa. 39:5). So the Preacher continues to describe:

“I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity” (Eccl. 3:18-19).

And the Psalmist spake likewise:

“Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish” (Psa. 49:20, 12).

Nebuchadnezzar is an illustration of this principle: he was a man in honour, yet did not recognise the power of Israel’s God:

“... he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers: and his nails like birds’ claws” (Dan. 4:33).

But in Nebuchadnezzar’s case, all was not lost: through this experience, he came to recognise Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews:

“Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of Heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase” (Dan. 4:37).

Whether or not Nebuchadnezzar recognized that Yahweh alone is God, or whether he just regarded Him as being one of the most powerful of the pantheon of gods he worshipped is not revealed, but certainly he was made to know that he was a beast that would perish in his lack of understanding. It is also interesting in connection with this, that in Daniel chapter 7, the various kingdoms of men are spoken of in terms of animals.

LABOUR IN WISDOM

Returning to the aspect of labour, Ecclesiastes chapter 2 describes labouring in the Word:

“... there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity: yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil” (Eccl. 2:21).

But whilst this is so when the labour is without God, we are told by Paul that “your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). For those who labour in spiritual things, there is great reward:

“let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who **labour in the word and doctrine ...**” (1 Tim. 5:17).

And again:

“Study to show thyself approved unto God, **a workman that needeth not to be ashamed**, rightly dividing the word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Labouring “in the word and doctrine” then, is incumbent upon all who would follow the ways of Christ. The implication is that if we do not so labour, then we will be workmen who do need to be ashamed!

Finally, the book of Ecclesiastes draws to a conclusion with these words:

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:13-14).

The point is sometimes made, that the word “duty” is not in the original, as indicated by the use of Italics. Hence it should read “this is the whole of man”: i.e. man is incomplete without the fear of God, and the keeping of his commandments. So Paul wrote to Timothy:

“All scripture it given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God **may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works**” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

This is the conclusion of the matter, which if followed, will make our lives anything but vain. If we fear God and follow His Ways, we will be granted life and salvation – it is imperative therefore, for us to seek first the Kingdom and Righteousness of God, that we might find favour in His Sight.

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