

- ***READ Ecclesiastes 1:1,2*** So far this year, our Daily Bible Reading schedule has taken us through the trials of Job, the beauty, power, and poetry of the Psalms, the practical wisdom of the Proverbs, and now we have arrived at another very unique book of the Old Testament wisdom literature. Like the Proverbs, there is not another book in the Bible like Ecclesiastes. It is a book that some have even claimed it should have no part in the cannon of Scripture. They might claim it to be nothing more than the demented clamoring of a grumpy man who finds himself dissatisfied with life.
 - But what about this book? What are we to do with this book that opens by telling us that everything in life is vanity? What are we to do when this supposed inspired writer tells us that everything we do in life is worthless? That would have to include the reading of this book, right? Wouldn't make much sense for an author to preface his or her book by saying that the book is a waste of time right? Of course that doesn't make sense, but I believe that a continued and careful reading of this book quickly allows the reader to understand what exactly is meant when the author says that this life is vanity.
 - This evening, I would like to take a few minutes to set the stage for our reading of Ecclesiastes over the next six weeks. Many of us are well familiar with this book having studied it in our auditorium class just a quarter ago. However, even as I taught this at a young peoples' study at the end of July, I was impressed with some things that I hadn't caught onto during our earlier study. Hopefully these readings will be a good refresher for some and a blessing to those who might not have been able to study with us earlier in the year. I want to give a brief description of the book, four key themes, and then what will hopefully be the outcome of our reading, study, and meditation upon this book of the Preacher, Ecclesiastes.
- I. **Ecclesiastes is a book of philosophy concerning our lives under the sun. (said 29x)**
- A. We made mention time and time again about the extremely practical nature of the Proverbs. So much real and down to earth teaching can be found within that book, and you will find some of the same in Ecclesiastes, but whereas the Proverbs were very heavy in the practicality of the teachings, I believe it would be accurate to say that Ecclesiastes shifts the focus from the practical teachings to more of the philosophy for why we should live this life the way God would have us to.
 - B. The opening verses don't focus on practical wisdom and action, but instead they focus on shaping our minds to recognize some important things concerning this life, particularly that it is vanity. I don't think it an accident at all that Solomon would write and put together a book like Proverbs, and then also write one such as Ecclesiastes. I know that there are some who disagree with the conclusion that Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes, but I think the evidence for such outweighs the alternative.
 - C. While the Proverbs might tell us how it is that we ought to live as wise and godly individuals, I think that Ecclesiastes follows up by teaching us why it is that we ought to live that way. Again, "**vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**" (said 37x throughout the book) If this is the case, then why should I care about how I live? What should motivate me to live in any particular type of way? Why shouldn't I live only with my own pleasures and desires in mind? The book begins with this seemingly strange declaration that could lead the reader to having the mindset where nothing matters, but then goes on to end in the most serious of ways by declaring that it is actually everything in this life that matters. ("**The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.**" **Ecclesiastes 12:13,14**) How do we get from everything is vanity to everything will be judged by God? I think we get this way by considering the four key themes that show up all through the book of Ecclesiastes.

II. 4 key themes to consider in Ecclesiastes:

A. The purpose of this life.

- 1) We could ask ten different people, "what is the purpose of life?", and we would probably get eleven different answers. Some would say that life is all about having fun and having and doing cool stuff. Others might say that life is all about making a difference. Others could say that life is about taking care about others and self. All of these things might sound good, and we'll find out in the book the Preacher was a man who recognized that these are often what draws our attention in this life.
- 2) However, after talking about how he did all of these things, the Preacher time and time again comes back with a *"this too is vanity and striving after wind"* or something similar to it, particularly in the first six chapters.. About 14 times this type of language is used after the Preacher talks about either his own or others efforts to find meaning and purpose in life in these types of ways.
- 3) While he says that these things don't give this life true meaning and purpose, see if you can find the things that the Preacher said doesn't bring true happiness and purpose to our lives.

B. Our attitude towards material wealth, enjoyment, & other temporal blessings.

- 1) One of those things that some might say brings purpose and happiness is that of material wealth or other temporal blessings. In chapter 2, the Preacher talks about how he sought to increase in all of these things (**2:1-10**), yet he again came to the realization that these things too are vanity. (**2:11**)
- 2) So how ought we to approach these things? Obviously, the Preacher wouldn't advocate all out devotion and effort to obtaining these things. **Chapters two through 6** speak to the fact that life is more than just about obtaining stuff, but he also doesn't say that the reader must live as a monk or a hermit. Instead, pay close attention to places such as **2:24** that discuss how we should be thankful and enjoy the temporal blessings that God has given to us.

C. Our pursuit of wisdom and knowledge.

- 1) Back in chapter 1, the Preacher discusses all of his efforts towards becoming wealthy in wisdom and knowledge. (**1:12-18**) If the Preacher is indeed Solomon then we know that he truly was the wisest man to live, but notice that he admits that increasing in either of these things brings with them their own set of problems.
- 2) So what then are we taught by Ecclesiastes concerning our pursuit of wisdom and knowledge? Once we get into **chapters seven and eight**, we will see where the Preacher says that wisdom will be a great aid to us in this life (*"Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. For wisdom is protection just as money is protection, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors."* **7:11,12**), but we shouldn't expect for it to solve every problem that we might ever be faced with. Not only that, but all of the knowledge in the world still won't allow us to answer every question we might have. As we read through Ecclesiastes, pay close attention to how we balance the need for wisdom with the understanding that it isn't a golden ticket to know all things.

D. Our response to the facts of life.

- 1) Then finally, we will see throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, a strong focus on how we will respond to the facts of life that we cannot change. Very quickly in chapter 1, we are confronted with the fact that generations come and go, and yet the earth remains the same regardless of what mankind accomplishes. (**1:3-11**) How will we respond to what might seem like helpless endeavors of trying to make a difference?
- 2) Ecclesiastes starts in this way, and this theme of wise response to life continues throughout the length of the book. We go on to see that wicked people often prosper while the righteous suffer. (**7:15**) We see that we will all grow old and eventually die. (**9:2,3**) We see that time and chance happen to all people. (**9:11**) These things are presented as fact by the Preacher, but he then seeks to help teach us how it is that we ought to respond to things that we just can't change. **Chapters 9,10,11, & 12** all focus on our response to the facts of life.

III. Considering and understanding these key themes will shape the way we live this life.

- A. With these four things being the key themes in this book, we come back to what we began with in understanding that this book is really a theological book of philosophy on how it is that we ought to live this life. This book puts forth purpose for this life that is from the standpoint of God. This book teaches us how God would have for us to see and us the temporal blessings He has given us. It shows us the importance of wisdom and knowledge without leading us to believe that they will solve everything. And it helps to teach us how we can respond to those things that we can't change.
- B. So many people live their lives knowing that there should be a purpose and a direction for what they are doing, but they constantly find themselves lost without that purpose and direction. The vast majority of these individuals find themselves in this place because they are looking for answers to the important questions in all of the wrong places. They seek to find wisdom in the minds of men, and they neglect to consult the ultimate wisdom of God.
- C. As we read through Ecclesiastes over the next few weeks, I hope that each of us will allow our minds and hearts to be influence by what we read. I hope that we will give great effort to consider and understand the teachings of the Preacher so that our own purpose and direction in this life will be shaped to be more as God would have it to be. If ever there was a book that was about real life and how God would have us to live it, it is found here in Ecclesiastes. God's wisdom and understanding is laid out for all of us to read and comprehend, and I hope we'll all give effort to have our hearts shaped by the words of this book. If we have questions about what we are doing or where we are trying to go, I hope we will give prayerful consideration to these words and teachings so that we can live this life as God would have us to.

Some would look to Ecclesiastes as the demented and depressed musings of a senile old man, but we know better. We know that God's wisdom empowered Solomon to simply write to the reader about life. But it isn't just a book about life, but it is a book about living life in such as way that God is pleased and we are benefited by His wisdom. May God bless us and be with us over the coming weeks as we seek to grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding through our reading of Ecclesiastes. ***PRAYER***