

The Godly Enjoyment of Futility – *Introduction to Ecclesiastes*

Introduction – How is it that I always seem to choose the slowest line in the grocery store? And why in the world do I really care? It doesn't take long until such melancholy meditation leads to despair over what the real meaning in life is. In order to avoid such depressive thoughts, our culture tends to amuse ourselves to death with superficial distractions which, in the end, leave us feeling like we've eaten too much cotton-candy; not empty, but certainly not satisfied. Most people try to determine a meaning to life, and many determine that life is hopeless, meaningless, and depressing. Many think that Solomon is admitting this and this alone in the book of Ecclesiastes. I hope to lead us through a time where we would see something quite different in this book and from our God. The end is not despair, nor is it stoicism, nor is it a denial of the "vanity" of life. This book, contrary to popular opinion, is not for the agnostic; it is for the believer. This is a great book of biblical, godly, Hebraic wisdom and it teaches us that only believers can openly and truly enjoy the vanity of life.

Qoheleth, the Gatherer – Translated as "the Preacher," this is the title the author gives to himself in the book. Traditionally, and with plenty of evidence, this book has been understood to have been written by Solomon, the Son of David (v1). In the LXX, the name is "Ecclesiastes," the one who assembles or gathers (people, things, or words). The autobiography of the writer (2:4-9) fits with Solomon.

Solomon – King David established, expanded, and defended the borders of Israel, bringing peace upon the land. When his son, Solomon, took the throne, and God was pleased to grant him wisdom like no other had as well as untold riches and honor (1 Kings 3:4-14). Indeed, his was a royal majesty like no other (1 Chron 29:25). However, Solomon also fell into grievous sin, including taking hundreds of wives and their idolatries (1 Kings 11:1-10). Ecclesiastes certainly brings us some perspective on this as well as a clear indication of his repentance and the gathering of his wisdom to pass on to the assembly.

Not For Agnostics – Some have thought this was the hippie-book of the sixties; as though someone had been smoking something. It has also been thought of as a book for the skeptic by a skeptic, a book of modern existentialism, nihilism, and despair. It is none of those. The book, and the argument of the book, has to be carefully followed from beginning to end and we must avoid picking out pet verses to use out of context for our own purposes. We must also avoid the temptation to throw up our hands, read 12:13-14 and think we are done with it. There is far more here for us.

Vanity of Vanities – This word, *vanity*, is used in about 29 verses and certainly is central to the book. There is a vanity about life that Solomon is addressing. As he speaks to this life of vanity, there is a constant refrain and a common theme running through the argument. They can appear to be in contradiction to one another. Actually, Solomon is "gathering" this all together, integrating the themes together as one in the sovereignty and grace of God.

Under the Sun – This refrain comes up in 27 verses throughout this book. This is what happens here, in this life, over and over. In the end, there is no profit from all our work (1:3, 2:11, 2:22). Nothing is revolutionary (1:9); it is all empty wind (1:14). Work is distressing (2:17) and our labor just goes to someone else (2:18), sometimes wasted by a fool (2:19-20). Under the sun men are oppressed (4:1), it's better to be unborn (4:3), and one's popularity is never settled (4:15-16). Under the sun, wealth brings misery (5:13, 6:1-2), and there is no assurance of where it all goes in the end (6:12). Under the sun, our busy lives make no sense (8:16-17). Both the good and the evil die (9:3) and all our passions perish with us (9:6). And these are only some of the verses....

First Point: God has predestined vanity under the sun.

The Great Gift of God – We aren't left in this book with despair or hopelessness at all if we get what Solomon wants us to understand and take deep into our hearts. There is a gift in the midst of all of the vanity. For those who fear God, the vanity does not go away. But for those who fear Him, God gives the gift of being able to enjoy the futility. He can enjoy his labor and its fruit (2:24). Again and again he says, "*nothing is better...*" because it is God's gift and portion (3:12-13, 3:22). There is a way to see all of this vanity and find deep joy in it (5:18-19), and we are commended to do so (8:15, 9:7-9).

*Second Point: We can enjoy our portion, our vanities,
if and only if God gives us the gift of enjoyment.*

The answer to the reality of futility is not to careen to one side (party, party, party – for tomorrow we die), nor to the other (morose, introspective meditation over why this has all happened to me). The answer to the reality of futility is to receive the gift of God's sovereign grace in all of life under the sun – to fear God and at the same time to not take ourselves quite so seriously. Eat your bread, drink your wine, and rejoice.

Stand in that slowest line – and laugh. It is the gift of God.