

“Vanity of Vanities”
Ecclesiastes 1:1-4
(Preached at Trinity, March 12, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Ecclesiastes falls under the genre of wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes is one of the most difficult books in the Bible. It is full of contrasts and apparent contradictions until the parts are compared with the whole.
2. Solomon is the author. He identifies himself as “the son of David, the king in Jerusalem.” I will make that assumption, avoiding the debates of those who doubt Solomon as the author. But this doesn't mean it is not without difficulty. For example, he begins speaking in the first person but by the end it is in the third person.
Whether or not Solomon is the human author, we cannot doubt, this is the Word of God. God has given it to us. God is teaching us, but it demands that we dig deeply.
3. Ecclesiastes follows the genre of wisdom literature, like Job, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon. This means it is not an Epistle where we might do a verse by verse exposition. Ecclesiastes is rich in metaphors and similes, hyperboles, and alliteration. It is full of word play. For example, the word for “vanity” is the same word for Abel, the son of Adam. The word for man in **Verse 2** is the word for “Adam.” The word for work in **Verse 2** is used twice – literally, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”
4. There is another point to consider. Assuming Solomon is the author, it leads us to a puzzling question. When did he write it? We know of Solomon's sad end, how his wives turned his heart from God and he fell into apostasy.
1 Kings 11:3-4 NAU - “He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. ⁴ For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father *had been*.”
A. But Solomon's life had been extraordinary. Israel enjoyed great prosperity. None possessed the wisdom of Solomon.
The Queen of Sheba traveled over a thousand miles just to hear of his wisdom.
1 Kings 10:3-6 NAU - “Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was hidden from the king which he did not explain to her. ⁴ When the queen of Sheba perceived all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, ⁵ the food of his table, the seating of his servants, the attendance of his waiters and their attire, his cupbearers, and his stairway by which he went up to the house of the LORD, there was no more spirit in her. ⁶ Then she said to the king, “It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom.”

- B. Solomon wrote extensively expressing the fullness of his wisdom.
1 Kings 4:31-32 NAU - "For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was *known* in all the surrounding nations. ³² He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005."
 It doesn't seem logical that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes during his early days. At this point of his life he wouldn't have concluded, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
- C. It is supposed that Solomon wrote the Book of Proverbs during this earlier period of his life.
 The Book of Ecclesiastes was likely written at the end of his life. If this is true, it's possible that **Chapter 12** gives us some hope that he turned from his apostasy.
Ecclesiastes 12:1 NAU - "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"
 None of this is in any way certain.
- D. God is a merciful God who remembers His covenant promises.
2 Samuel 7:12-15 NAU - "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ "He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you."
5. Ecclesiastes is in the form of a sermon. Solomon, the Preacher, is preaching to us all.
Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAU - "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."
 A. The theme is expressed at the beginning
 "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
 It is expressed in sixteen verses—five times in **Verse 2**.
 And in the final chapter Solomon concludes:
 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!"
 B. The word literally refers to a vapor or mist. Something that quickly fades away, like your breath on a cold winter morning.
 James describes our life as a vapor.
James 4:14 NAU - "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."
 David also referred to human life as a mere breath:
Psalms 39:5 NAU - "Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; Surely every man at his best is a mere breath."

- C. The word can also mean, “useless, futile, empty, vain.”
- a. The scope is universal. ALL is vanity. Solomon has in mind all that comprises a man’s life. During the course of this Book Solomon will approach the subject from the many aspects of our life.
 - b. His point is not that all life is meaningless. Solomon will argue that life without God is meaningless. He’ll stress the emptiness and vanity of this world; of what happens when we choose what this world has to offer instead of what God provides.
- D. Solomon says ALL is vanity. There is no meaning, no purpose. Why are we having an epidemic of suicides? Because there is no meaning apart from Jesus Christ.
- In 2020 45,000 people committed suicide—one every 11 minutes.
12 million thought about it, 3 million made a plan, 1.2 million attempted suicide.
- a. In Ecclesiastes Solomon calls upon us to put this world in the proper perspective. We are not to put our hope or happiness upon earthly treasures or worldly pleasures.
 - b. Solomon teaches us that a life without God is empty, futile, worthless. It quickly vanishes like a vapor. The only way to a meaningful life is the fear of God.
 - c. Because human beings have turned away from God and denied Him His worship God has given them over to the depravity of their heart. They have become fools. The Greek word for fool is μωραίω. We get our English word moron from it.
Romans 1:21-22 NAU - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,"
 - d. Without God men have become morons. The Bible tells us that true wisdom begins with the reverence and worship of God.
Psalms 111:10 NAU - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*; His praise endures forever."
6. Solomon also uses frequent words that give us hope. The word “wisdom” or “wise” is found 53 times and God is found forty times. The purpose of this Book is to point us to the only source of meaning, of purpose, of wisdom. God must be our all in all.
 7. Ecclesiastes also stands as a warning to us all. If Solomon in all of his wisdom fell under the vanity of sin, how much are each of us in danger.

- I. The first area that Solomon focuses is our earthly work, the labors that are the focus of our life.
- A. To what advantage is it? Is there any profit in it?
Ecclesiastes 1:3 NAU - "What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?"
1. What "advantage?" What "profit?" The Hebrew word is found only in Ecclesiastes. Solomon uses it here fourteen times. What profit is there in all of our labors?
 2. Solomon draws our attention to the subject of labor often. The Hebrew word, (עָמַל – amal) occurs 24 times in this Book. If you include all forms of the word, Solomon uses it 38 times in this Book.
 - a. We'll return to the subject many times. Human beings are engaged in much labor in this life. There are endless toils that demand our attention.
 - b. People in the West place much of our identity in our work. Upon meeting someone it doesn't take long for us to ask, "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?" The question almost always takes priority over, "Do you know Christ?"
 - c. Solomon will point out many of our motives for labor. By it we seek personal happiness and meaning in life. We seek profit, boast in our abilities. We use it to elevate ourselves over others—our status or rank in society.
- B. Solomon asks one of the many rhetorical questions in Ecclesiastes. What value is our labor?
1. Since we place high value upon our earthly labors one would expect to answer there is great value.
 2. Solomon has set up the context. The answer to his question is expected – there is no value in the labors of life.
Ecclesiastes 1:14 NAU - "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."
 4. It is also one of the contradicting statements in Ecclesiastes. Lived for God's honor, there is great value in our labors.
Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 NAU - "There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?"
 But apart from God, nothing in life has value or meaning.
 5. Solomon will give us several reasons why our labors fall short of our expectations.

- II. The first problem with our labors is the brevity of life
Ecclesiastes 1:4 NAU - "A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever."
- A. Solomon sets up the permanence of the earth as a contrast
1. The earth continues from the beginning of creation to the end.
 2. The mountains remain. The oceans are the same. We gaze into the same sky that the Apostles did.
- B. But there are countless generations of men.
1. In general, a Biblical generation is 40 years.
 David doubles this to eighty but still affirms the brevity.
Psalm 90:10 NAU - "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, Or if due to strength, eighty years, Yet their pride is *but* labor and sorrow; For soon it is gone and we fly away."
 2. In all of our boasting of self-importance and arrogance we are but dust that will blow away in the wind.
 3. Everyone wants to leave behind a legacy. We all want to be remembered. The truth is most people labor their whole life and then they are forgotten.
 - a. In all likelihood, in 3-4 generations you will be forgotten.
 - b. Even those whose lives are full of accomplishment are soon forgotten. After the accomplishments of Joseph in Egypt it was just a few generations before he was completely forgotten.
Exodus. 1:8 NAU - "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."
Ecclesiastes 1:11 NAU - "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*."
 4. We love our celebrities and often worship them. We refer to them as stars. Some even elevate celebrity preachers. We listen to their sermons and read their books. Get them to sign our Bibles. But their fame will be short-lived.
 5. Douglas O'Donnell rightly comments, "Today's celebrities are tomorrow's obituaries, and their names are as disposable as the morning paper in which their life stories will be printed. And if that is what becomes of our celebrities, what will become of us?"¹

¹ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 22.

Conclusion:

1. What we will learn as we travel through Ecclesiastes is a life without Christ is meaningless. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."
 What good are earthly accomplishments apart from Christ. But a day in the presence of Christ is greater than a thousand outside. The Psalmist carried this thought.
Psalm 84:10 NAU - "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand *outside*. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness."
2. But a life lived in Christ is a life that has discovered the source of all things.
Philippians 1:21 NAU - "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."
Philippians 4:13 NAU - "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."
3. Paul concluded that everything else is rubbish.
Philippians 3:8-11 NAU - "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."