10-1-23

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Doesn’t reading Ecclesiastes just make you feel so good about life?

Many folks don’t like the book of Ecclesiastes because it seems so pessimistic and depressing; and in one sense, it is. But my hope in this sermon is to give an overall understanding of what is going on so that you will be encouraged to read this book and give it some study. It really gives the Christian a pleasant outlook on life; a way to consider life under the sun so that it is actually fulfilling and hopeful.

One of the main things to remember is that Ecclesiastes is considering life from a secular worldview. In such a worldview, everything is ultimately vain; ultimately worthless. This book is a work of king Solomon, the son of king David who succeeded him on the throne of Israel. In 1 Kings 3, Solomon asked God for understanding so that he could rule God’s people well. God was pleased with this request and granted it to him along with great wealth and power. Interestingly, Solomon’s life is a case study in the difference between having wisdom and applying it to one’s life. While he was known far and wide for his wisdom and knowledge, he also made some very serious mistakes.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon makes some observations about life from a secular standpoint. Then, because he has the means to do so, he indulges in everything that is supposed to make one happy in this life. Over and over he uses the phrase “under the sun”, which means life on this earth and usually without respect to God and heaven. Again, this is considering the life of someone who refuses to acknowledge God; in other words, most people.

But throughout the book and primarily at the end, we see glimpses of God and how remembering Him changes the entire outlook on life. The life of the Believer is very different from the non-believer because we consider life with eternity in view. We know that death is not the end and that everyone will stand before God for judgement; either for reward or punishment.

Verse 12:11 says, “*The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd*.” For Solomon, the title “Shepherd” would be God; but we understand that it would be for Jesus. The words of this book, like the rest of the Bible, are the words of God. These words are given for our instruction; how we may glorify God and how we may live a proper and meaningful life: a meaningful life is not possible for the one who denies God.

The conclusion of the book is chapter 12 verses 13 and 14 which give us final instructions and a final warning. *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.* In order to have a life that is truly meaningful we must revere God and we must follow His command which is to have His only begotten Son, Jesus, as our Saviour. And there is the warning of the coming judgement. To ignore this warning will bring about a life of vanity and futility.

Looking back at our verses in chapter 1, once he has introduced himself, the author makes a startling announcement: “*Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*.” Everything is included, nothing is left out; everything is a vain undertaking; everything we do is meaningless. Again, our clue comes in verse 2 where we see that he is referring to “under the sun.” This is everything that people do when they are operating outside of God; when they are not in Christ Jesus.

From a worldly perspective, what is the purpose of all the work we do? The word “work” in verse 3 may be translated “labor”, and it refers to the physical aspect of doing work but it also implies the emotional and mental aspects. When we work, what do we ultimately gain? We provide food and shelter which are necessary in order to live; but at the end of life, there is no lasting value. We can gain lots of material possessions or even wealth and power, but we can’t take it with us. Even doing good for others is left behind us and most of our names are forgotten within a few generations. Those whose names are somehow remembered for history gain no advantage because they are dead and don’t know their fame.

There are many who take great pride in what they do during their life; but they are often ignoring the fact that death is coming. The Bible warns us about this attitude and tells us the truth of the matter concerning God. The apostle John wrote in 1 John 2:16-17, “*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever*.”

Taking some pride in one’s work and doing a good job is fine. But the Christian does this for an ultimate purpose of praising God, not for their own glory. Colossians 3:23 points us in the right direction: *Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.* Here is the difference for the Christian: We do our work with eternity in mind. What we do in Christ Jesus will have eternal reward; so it is not vanity, it is not futility.

There are many who come to realize that all is meaningless and give up trying; they live a life of despondency and don’t care about anything. I think this is why there are so many today who are able to commit such heinous crimes with absolute heartlessness. If there is nothing else, why bother? Again, we who are Christians know that there is something else. There is eternal life or eternal death, depending on one’s stand with Jesus. We realize that what we do in this life does have eternal consequences. Our lives here and now have meaning; and part of our meaning is to bring others to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In the next few verses of our study, Solomon turns to nature. The sun rises and sets, rises and sets. Over and over again. It puts me in mind of a NASCAR race. The drivers go round and round at 100 miles per hour, going nowhere. The winner is the one who gets back to where he started first. How pointless is that? For the person who puts stock in the big bang theory and in evolution, this is what the world and universe look like. It’s all random and going nowhere.

The sun goes ‘round; the wind blows this way and that; and all the rivers flow into the ocean but never accomplish filling it up. Nature appears to be moving along forever and accomplishing nothing. And in one respect, nature is under a curse and accomplishing nothing due to the sins of mankind. This is not some sort of environmental sin where we aren’t taking care of the earth as we ought; this is the effect of mankind’s rebellion against God. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God pronounced judgement: “*Cursed is the ground because of you*” And Paul tells us in Romans 8:22, “*For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.*”

This reminds us that the effects of sin are tangible. And the effects of sin do not just remain on the one who commits them; that’s not fair, but sin is evil and evil is not fair. All the suffering in the world, all the natural catastrophes, every unpleasant thing is the result of sin. We must never let ourselves take sin lightly. God hates sin; and so we must hate it also.

But how does the Christian deal with the cursed and meaningless actions of nature? First, we remember the beginning of Genesis. The universe, the world, and all that is in them was created by God. God spoke all into existence and when He looked upon all He had created, He saw that it was “very good”. We can look at the sun and moon and stars of the sky and know that they are not random but that our all-powerful God made them; and they display His glory. All the magnificent plants and animals that we see show His majesty; the different kinds of life and their beauty are beyond what we might imagine let alone appear by chance.

And furthermore we have a promise: Revelation 21:5, ‘*“And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.”*’ We have this word directly from God that He will recreate everything. There will be a new heavens and a new earth for us to live in and it will not be cursed like the present creation is. Sin will be gone and all its effects will be gone.

We also have the promise of 2 Corinthians 5:17, “*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come*.” This gives us the reassurance that what we do in this life is not futile; it is for our eternal benefit. Also this promise is only partially fulfilled when we accept Jesus; whereby we are given a new spiritual heart and the ability to be pleasing to God. But it will be completely fulfilled when we are resurrected in Christ and given a new body which will never know the ravaging of sin.

As verse 8 tells us “*All things are wearisome*.” For one thing, that is part of the curse for the sin of Adam. The ground was cursed because of him so in toil he would eat of it all the days of his life. When we work, we become tired. Furthermore, even things we enjoy can become tiresome after a while. That is part of the sadness of this life and part of what leads the carnal man to despair.

Just like the rivers never fill up the sea, our eyes never see enough and our ears never hear enough. There is never enough to ultimately satisfy us in this life. Again, many dig in and work harder, trying to achieve happiness and satisfaction; or to simply ignore the obvious futility of what they are doing. Or many give up seeking any kind of satisfaction, believing that it is all pointless.

When life is lived “under the sun”; lived from an entirely worldly perspective, there is nothing new. History repeats itself with people living and dying, nations at war, suffering and stress of life, and then we die. After that, there is nothing. And as in verse 4, “*The earth remains forever*.”

But we who have Christ know that history is not cyclic; the world will not go on forever just the way it has. History will come to an abrupt end. We are told in 2 Peter 3:7, “*But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*” This will be the elimination of sin and evil and the good news for us is what we’ve already looked at in Revelation; that God will make for us a new heaven and a new earth.

From a worldly point of view, verse 11 reminds us that whatever we might accomplish or who we are will be forgotten. Each of us has already forgotten our ancestors from just a few generations back; and we will be forgotten just a few generations from now. And while some may build monuments to themselves or perform accomplishments so we will be remembered; it won’t matter since we will be dead. The view of the world without God is indeed depressing.

The thing is that when we leave the realm of “under the sun” and enter the realm of heaven, our deeds are not forgotten. In Christ, we are remembered each time we give Him food and drink, give Him shelter or clothing, or care for Him when He is sick or in prison. All our good work when we are in Christ is remembered. The only thing forgotten is our sin, because Jesus has already won a full pardon for us and there is no need for remembrance.

There is an unusual thought put forth in Ecclesiastes for the Christian, but when properly understood it holds great comfort. It is in chapter 9 verses 7-9:

*Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.*

There are also several other times where this same sentiment is expressed in Ecclesiastes. From a worldly view, it means enjoy yourself because you’re just going to die. But not for the Christian.

It is true that this world has a lot of darkness and will not ultimately satisfy our longings. But in Christ, we have a wonderful freedom to enjoy whatever God has blessed us with. When we have food and drink, we can gratefully receive it from God and be content with it. If we have the clothing we need, we can be grateful for it and not be consumed with having the latest fashions. If He has blessed us with family it is a good gift from Him.

When we labor and work while a part of the body of Christ, He blesses us with contentment in the things we have from our labor. And we can be content because we know that what we do will last and we will receive eternal reward.

Prayer

Precious Lord, how dim the world looks through the natural eyes of man. You tell us that You have put eternity in our hearts, so there is no way for us to be satisfied with the temporal. The brightness and glory of Christ cannot be seen with eyes clouded by sin. Our earthly head is bowed and we only look down, seeing the earth which had been cursed.

When the light of Christ shines into our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, how blessed we are if we respond in faith! As our Saviour Jesus once told us, “*But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*” Thank You for shining that light of Jesus within us; no darkness can overcome it, and we can glimpse eternity. Our lives here become meaningful.

In You, our lives are not vanity. Strengthen us and guide us that we may do works that are pleasing to You. We no longer strive to gain access to God; You have gained that for us. But may our work expand the Kingdom of Jesus and bring souls into the light of Christ; so that futility is abolished and Your glory is made known.

In Jesus’ name

Amen