

Route Sixty-Six

Part Twenty-One

Ecclesiastes

A Well-Lived Life

(John 5:39 Matthew 16:24-26)

With Study Questions

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You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul (Matthew 16:24-26)?

Introduction

Interesting, pleasant, informative, humorous, yet often empty are words which describe a great many, perhaps most, of the casual, social conversations in which I find myself. I recently caught up with a long-time acquaintance. This is very common for me since I’ve lived in the same community all my life. We talked about our current occupations, the directions our children were taking and the state of our health. It was all very nice.

Yet these types of conversations leave me feeling the way I felt when I first came to faith and started watching the old movies my father and I enjoyed as a child. The movies generally had a happy ending (Depression era films), but I began to realize that the characters (at least in the movie) gave no indication of having made peace with God. How could this be a happy ending? Now when I watch those old movies everyone is currently dead. Maybe I’m not the best person to watch a movie with. Depressing!

And yet this type of message can have popular appeal. As a teenager (the sixties) a song by an artist named Peggy Lee, entitled *Is That All There Is* was a top 40 hit. It was a miserable, yet captivating, song about how, as a young girl, she saw a fire, the circus and fell in love, all followed by the

refrain “Is that all there is?” The song ends with a dismal, ‘you’re probably wondering why I don’t just end it all’ with the answer being ‘I’m not ready for the final disappointment.’

The appeal of the song was its gloomy honesty; the type of honesty most prefer to avoid. The joyful cockeyed, unrealistic optimism of Tigger is just more fun to be around than the disconsolate, more realistic negativism of Eeyore. Yet we ignore the honesty at our own peril. Ecclesiastes is brutally and uncomfortably honest.

Survey of Ecclesiastes

The author of Ecclesiastes (Solomon) refers to himself as **“the Preacher” (Ecclesiastes 1:1)**. This word, *Koheleth*, may not be precisely synonymous with our use of the word, but more along the lines of a master of assemblies or a teacher. The recurring theme is **“Vanity of vanities...all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)**, highlighting the emptiness or meaninglessness of his experience as it pertains to life.

Ecclesiastes might be compared to a vast sociological experiment where the subject of the experiment and the one administering the experiment are the same person. Add to that, his resources are virtually without limit. They are without limit in terms of budget and the wisdom to conduct the experiment (Ecclesiastes 2:9).

Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom (2 Chronicles 9:22).

And what was the experiment? The experiment explores where things go in this life on the grounds of natural experience. It all begins with a sort ‘what’s the point?’ monologue. One generation dies and another one comes (Ecclesiastes 1:4). We seek to comfort ourselves with the suggestion that our departed friends and loved one will live on in memories, but Solomon won’t countenance such a falsehood:

For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Most of us don't know the names of our departed great-great grandparents. The sun goes up then goes down, the wind blows, the rivers flow and **"nothing is new under the sun"** (Ecclesiastes 1:9). What is the point?

Solomon then seeks to apply wisdom to the matter. Someone might here ask, if Solomon were so wise, why couldn't he see the folly of this entire pursuit in advance? We must keep in mind that the supernatural gift from God to Solomon was not goodness or faithfulness. He applied wisdom in many good ways, but his flesh (as evidenced by his many wives) often ran roughshod over his wisdom. We are now called to take advantage of his findings. Yet, I wonder how many of us, like the foolish youth, must learn the hard way and carry the baggage of our failures through life. We may learn through our sins and failures, but we are never better off for having sinned.

The Preacher, in his wisdom, came to conclude that the fall has left this world in such chaos, that our basic and worldly observations cannot lead us to certain conclusions:

**Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright,
But they have sought out many schemes (Ecclesiastes 7:29).**

Trying to make sense of, and bring purpose to, this world apart from God is a fool's errand. One will hear everything from "have fun" to "family is everything" to "you only live once so grab for all the gusto". Epicureanism (a focus on the enjoyment of life), Stoicism (seeking indifference to the pains and pleasures of life), Hedonism (human pleasure being the highest good), Nihilism (meaninglessness), etc., Solomon dabbled in them all.

At one point he made the astonishing statement:

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:10a).

Yet concluded that **"all was vanity and grasping for the wind"** (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Shortly after this is recorded, like a disillusioned child, Solomon laments, **"Therefore I hated life"** (Ecclesiastes 2:17a).

Pleasure, providence, injustice, inequality, enigmas prevail. Is wisdom superior to foolishness. His answer is yes. We should seek to

encourage a world full of goodness, wisdom, trustworthiness, and peace. But in a godless world, the wise, the fool, the good, the evil, the winner and the loser have the same fate.

He pushes it even further. To a point that many animal activists would assuredly applaud. The human does not a superior ending to the animal.

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all *is* vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

When I was in high school and Christian singer came and sang at an assembly. I recall speaking to her briefly after the concert. I don't recall the topic of the conversation, but I do recall one answer she gave to something I must have asked. Her answer was, "We don't just die, like dogs." It is with abundant thoughtfulness that Solomon arrives at the inevitable conclusion that, in a world without God (or even a world with some distant acknowledgment of a god), humans and animals are ultimately indistinct.

All of this can leave us melancholy. Even as I write this, I ask myself how far down the rabbit hole am I willing to take this message? At the same time, I think I can say (at the risk of sounding braggadocios) that the message contained Ecclesiastes has yielded in me an ability to enjoy this life, perhaps more than any other in Scripture. Before I explain this, something needs to be said about how to read a book like Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes must be read in its entirety, with the context always in mind. For example, what do we do with this verse?

Do not be overly righteous, Nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself (Ecclesiastes 7:16)?

Is he truly advising us to avoid too much righteousness or too much wisdom? If so, in obeying this advice, are we not violating it at the same time. If the counsel of God is the source of wisdom, would it not be in my obedience to His counsel that wisdom is gained? We're stuck in a catch-22 (a classic Kobayashi Maru).

No, a passage like this must be read with the context (which is good and evil things happening to just and wicked people) in mind. Two potentially acceptable ways of understanding would be: don't allow your identity to be wrapped up in how wise or righteous you are; or don't trust in your own wisdom or righteousness to somehow yield a superior condition in this life; or don't trust in your own wisdom or righteousness over the superior wisdom and righteousness which comes from Christ.

A similarly perplexing verse is found in the twelfth chapter.

And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books *there is no end*, and much study *is wearisome to the flesh* (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

No doubt, many a seminary student has had this verse framed in their dorm. Yet this is not a passage which endorses lethargy in our studies, as should be evident by the numerous times he extols acquiring wisdom through study. One acceptable interpretation is for the student to realize that there is a time to put the book down and engage in life.

Another related interpretation is to discriminate regarding who you will spend your time reading. Years ago, I made a critical comment about a paragraph from an author in a book of his that I was reading. I was told that I needed to read all thirteen of his published works if I wanted to truly grasp his meaning. It didn't seem a wise use of my time to accommodate the request.

Christ in Ecclesiastes

Back to my earlier statement. How has the message contained in Ecclesiastes yielded in me an ability to enjoy this life, perhaps more than any other in Scripture? Because woven throughout Ecclesiastes is the notion that the things that are done "under the sun" which are vain, are designed to bring our attention to that which is done, as it were, over the sun.

A theme in Ecclesiastes is the appropriate enjoyment of a wise, temperate, grateful engagement in this life with a steadfast faith in God. We are to enjoy our spouse (9:9), enjoy our food, our drink (5:18) enjoy our rest, enjoy our neighbors, our work (3:22), our years (11:8); our possessions

(5:19). The findings of this experiment do not lead to monasticism or some extreme denial of the joys of this life.

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17).

I can enjoy who I am, who I know, what I have and whatever the day may bring, precisely because I am not trusting in those things but rather merely enjoying them. And a good test to how much I am trusting rather than enjoying them is how deeply I crumble at the threat of losing them.

Sprinkled throughout the “under the sun” message of Ecclesiastes is an over the sun focus. Heed the value of a memorial service for it highlights our own mortality (Ecclesiastes 7:2). God has put “**eternity in our hearts**” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We are to “**walk prudently**” when we go to the house of God (Ecclesiastes 5:1). The book ends:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man’s all. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

This is the message of Christ from beginning to end. “**Do not love the world**” (1 John 2:15); “**Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy**” (Matthew 6:19). Hear the sobering words of Christ:

For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul (Matthew 16:26)?

People mistakenly read these words as if true, pious faith holds all of God’s worldly gifts in contempt. That is not the message of Ecclesiastes or of Christ. Years ago my house needed a new roof. It was difficult for me to enjoy my house because I knew the rain would leak through and ruin what I owned. A peaceful and reasonable enjoyment of my house required the roof be replaced. A reliable covering was necessary. Those who are covered by the blood of Christ can, and should seek to, enjoy the home of

this life given to us by God, with a sure knowledge that this life ends with a judgment of glory.

A wonderful, Academy Award winning movie (with the biblical title: Chariots of Fire) came out in 1981 comparing two athletes who competed in the 1924 Olympics. One was a Christian, one was not. I recall two lines from that movie that I think expresses my point: The nerve-wracked non-Christian whose coach is seeking to comfort him by explain that the 100 meter is “tailor-made for neurotics” pathetically exposes his underbelly:

I'll raise my eyes and look down that corridor.....4 feet wide.....with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?

Now we compare this to the words of the believer. He is trying to convince his doubting sister that he is not neglecting his missionary efforts in order to compete. He explains:

I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.

Who do you think enjoyed running more?

Questions for Study

1. Do you find that many of your conversations or interactions are not entirely fulfilling? If so, why (pages 2, 3)?
2. Is honesty always comfortable? Why or why not (pages 2, 3)?
3. What is the recurring theme in Ecclesiastes? What does it mean (page 3)?
4. How is Ecclesiastes like an experiment (page 3)?
5. What are some of the methods of living that Solomon tried? What methods do you see in our current culture (pages 4, 5)?
6. What is Solomon's initial conclusion (pages 4, 5)?
7. What are some errors to avoid in reading Ecclesiastes (pages 5, 6)?
8. How can that which is taught in Ecclesiastes yield a life well-lived (pages 6-8)?