

Finding Your Purpose in Life

Lessons From Ecclesiastes

Student Workbook

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Lessons From Ecclesiastes

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Ecclesiastes

Lesson 1

Introduction

Lesson Goal:

To understand God's purpose for this book in His holy word. What questions are answered in this book that are not answered in any other book of the Bible?

Text:

Ecclesiastes

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what life is all about? Perhaps one starlit night you gazed up into the vast expanse of heaven and pondered the meaning of life. "Why am I here? What is my purpose? As I live day by day, what should I pursue to find meaning, purpose, contentment, and happiness?" These are worthwhile questions and questions that any thoughtful person will ask.

However, instead of asking these questions many people just let life happen. "I was born into these circumstances." "I got this job." "I married this person." "My parents weren't religious so I'm not either." It's as though instead of thinking and choosing and living their lives, many simply become spectators of their lives. What a shame; what a waste.

Years and years ago there was a very wise man who determined he would not simply be a spectator of life. He determined to find meaning and purpose to life. In addition to being very wise, he also was in the unique position of having tremendous power and wealth. There was nothing he could not try, buy, build, or consume. He set about trying everything. And his conclusions are amazing. His journey to reach his conclusions is even more amazing. He chronicled his journey and conclusions in a journal titled "Ecclesiastes." On nearly every page of this man's journal you will find yourself. His journey and yours are very similar. Let's take a look.

Background of the book

There is disagreement about who wrote Ecclesiastes. Many scholarly Bible commentators (Leupold, Delitzsch, et al) contend that the book was not authored by King Solomon but by one identified simply as Koheleth which is the Hebrew word for preacher (1:1, 12). They note that there is no mention of Solomon by name anywhere in the book and the phrase "son of David, King in Jerusalem" (1:1) could have been a broad description of one who was faithful to God but not necessarily a physical son of David. The scholars also contend that the suffering and injustice described in portions of the

book would not have been consistent with Solomon's reign as king which was an unparalleled time of peace and prosperity. Finally, the scholars find it troubling that Solomon could write so eloquently (chapters 12) on life and its meaning when there is no indication that he ever repented of his idolatry brought on by marrying multiple wives with various religious beliefs. So their conclusion is that Koheleth authored the book sometime following the return from Babylonian captivity. For parts of the book he appears to take on the perspective of Solomon (1:12 – 2:26) but Koheleth (the preacher) was the author.

In spite of scholarly disagreement, I will present this series of lessons from the point of view that King Solomon is the human author but I want the reader to understand that the human author of the book is not positively known and many do not believe (for the reasons stated above) that it was Solomon. My reasoning is simple. First, I do not intend these short lessons to be a scholarly study of Ecclesiastes but rather a series of brief practical lessons on life. To satisfy my objectives, the human author of the book is of little importance. The substance of the message, whether authored by Solomon or Koheleth, is just as powerful and practical and is obviously **God's message** to us regarding life "under the sun." Secondly, I do not have a problem with Solomon (who we know was granted great wisdom from God) knowing more than he practiced. In other words, while his actions later in life are quite sad, I still believe he could have written the words that tell us to "*fear God and keep His commandments.*" Many is the person who has not lived up to God's standard but it does not mean that they do not understand it. Similarly, I believe Solomon's wisdom allowed him to see injustice and suffering even in a time of peace and prosperity. Just because Israel was not at war did not mean everyone treated everyone fairly and his wisdom also allowed him to see injustice in other lands under foreign kings.

Regarding the human author, we cannot be absolutely certain. However, regarding the heavenly author and His message, we all can agree. This book gives a unique description of life on earth ("under the sun"). It is unique from all of the other 65 books in God's Word and it is unique from anything written by man. Those seeking to offer counsel and guidance to the young, the old, the poor, the rich, the scholar, the uneducated, the grieving, and the rejoicing should carefully study this book over and over. True wisdom comes from above (James 3:17).

Questions For Discussion

1. Do a word search or internet search to learn the meaning of the word "Ecclesiastes." Is it Greek, Latin, or Hebrew? What does it mean?
2. What does it mean to be wise? How does wisdom differ from knowledge?
3. Describe the wisdom God granted to Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:29-34).
4. Why was God so generous in granting Solomon wisdom? Re. 1 Kings 3:7-13.

5. Can we expect God to be generous to us also when we make requests of Him?
See James 1:5-8 and Matthew 7:7-11
6. What is a journal? Why do people keep them?
7. What do we learn about a person when reading their journal? Is a journal a reflection of the things most important to that person at that time?
8. Has the nature of man changed since the time of Solomon? Can we learn valuable lessons by reading/studying his journal?
9. Do you see wisdom in the world today? If so, where is it and in what form?
10. What troubles you most today? Why? Can answers to these troubles be found in God's word?

Making Application

For just this week (you may continue longer if you choose), keep a journal. Each day write down the thoughts on your mind. It might be work, it might be family, it might be church. The thoughts might be things that are troubling you or they might be things that make you happy. It doesn't have to be long, eloquent, or detailed. Just write. At the end of the week, go back and read your journal. You may want to quickly categorize your thoughts for the week (what was most on your mind?): work, family issues, relationships, personal conflicts, injustices in the world, financial problems, good friendships, health problems, happy times with family or friends, etc. Don't make this a huge task (or it won't get done) but take 5 or 10 minutes each day and write down what is on your mind. Unlike Solomon's journal no one else ever needs to see it or read it.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson 2

Vanity of Vanities, All Is Vanity

Lesson Goal:

To understand the key message in the first chapter of the book and to make application in our lives today.

Text:

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1

Introduction

Solomon begins his journal by figuratively “throwing up his hands” in despair. All is lost, there is no meaning or purpose in life. All is vanity. It is as frustrating as trying to catch the wind. Have you ever felt this way? Have there been days, particularly before you allowed God into your life, when there just seemed to be no hope? Who hasn’t felt this way at one time or another? And, as Solomon will soon show, it doesn’t matter how rich you are, or how highly educated, or if you are the king or the lowest servant. Without God, hopelessness comes to all. Despair is not just the lot of the poor and society’s outcasts. How many rich and famous people, who we think have it all, give up and take their lives? Why? In most instances, they could not find meaning or hope in their lives. There was an emptiness or void in their lives that could only be filled by God (and they didn’t have God).

Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote a poem about such a man. The poem is titled “Richard Corey.” This man, Richard Corey, had it all. He was fabulously wealthy, handsome, highly educated, and famous. He gave generously to charities, spoke kindly to others, and carried himself with great dignity. The poem was written from the perspective of a lowly worker who viewed Richard Corey from afar and reasoned that life must have been wonderful for him.

“In fine we thought that he was everything
to make us wish that we were in his place.”

But all was not as it appeared on the outside. Inside was a very troubled man. To truly know a man we must know his heart (Proverbs 4:23). Riches are not the source of peace. And the poem had a tragic ending.

“So on we toiled and waited for the light.
And went without the meat and cursed the bread.
And Richard Corey one calm summer night
Went home and put a bullet through his head.”

Solomon looked around and saw how all things under the sun continued regardless of the comings and goings of man. He saw that, in the final analysis, there was no profit (lasting value) from all of man's work (vs. 3). Man works and works but does not find satisfaction (vs. 8). There really is nothing new and as one generation passes and another comes, little is remembered of the former days. We act as though our works will last forever but they hardly last to the next generation and then the things for which we worked so hard are simply gone (just like us).

***“...For what is your life?
It is even a vapor that appears for a little time
and then vanishes away.”***

James 4:14

Can you relate to what he is saying? Can you relate to his observations? Can you see the wisdom in what he says? Then surely **in wisdom** there is peace and understanding and contentment. NOPE. In the final verses in this opening chapter of his journal, Solomon expresses the vanity he found in earthly (under the sun) wisdom.

***“For in much wisdom is much grief,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”*** (vs. 18)

But there is a wisdom that brings peace, and life, and meaning. It is “above the sun” (heavenly) wisdom and it is mentioned in the final entry to Solomon's journal (12:9-12). It took Solomon a lifetime to grasp the difference between earthly wisdom and “the wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17). Most never do.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Look up the word “vanity”. What does it mean? What would be a modern day word for vanity i.e. a synonym?
2. In verse 2 the word “vanity” is used five times. In God's Word, words are repeated for emphasis e.g. “Holy, Holy, Holy; Verily, Verily.” Why the emphasis on vanity in the second verse of this book?
3. As you look around, what things in life appear to you to be vanity? You do not need to make a comprehensive list, just the big things.
4. In verse 7 it says that “to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again.” What is happening here? How do the waters in the rivers which run into the sea, eventually return to the rivers?

5. Verses 9 and 10 state that there is “nothing new under the sun.” We know modern day cars and computers are new. To what do you think Solomon was referring when he made this statement?
6. Did you know your grandparents before they died? What actions or words of advice do you remember from them? Do you wish you knew or remembered more?
7. It is good for man to work with his mind and hands (5:18; 9:10) but should our earthly labor be our purpose in life? See also Matthew 6:19-21).
8. How would you define “wisdom”? How does wisdom differ from knowledge?
9. Contrast the type of wisdom found in 1:16-18 with the wisdom mentioned in 12:9-12a (the latter part of verse 12 refers to earthly wisdom and knowledge).
10. Regarding 1:18, the Bible commentator Matthew Henry said this: “The more we know the more we see of our own ignorance.” Do you think this is a fair statement? Why or why not?

Making Application

How would you like to be remembered? Is it your physical appearance, your wit, your accomplishments, your knowledge, your friendship, or? What is it you are doing to be remembered? If your answer is a physical thing i.e. something attached to this world, you will not be remembered, at least not for very long. Even of the great and mighty kings who once ruled, we know very little and who is to say if those who wrote history got it right. But, if what you want to be remembered for is spiritual, your memory and your works will live on in eternity. If you bring one person to Christ, that person will thank you in heaven and the memory of your life and it’s importance will never be forgotten. I know there is a lady in heaven I need to thank. Her name is Mrs. Bailey. I never knew her very well because I was very young when she crossed the street to talk to her new neighbors, my mom and dad. She invited them to the assembly of the church, they accepted, obeyed the gospel, were baptized, and in turn taught their children the gospel of Christ.

The things you strive for in your life are vanity and will not last unless they are “above the sun.” Solomon realized the vanity of life here without God. Make a difference, put true meaning into your life, and be remembered forever. Choose to make a difference to someone today. They will thank you eternally.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Three

The Wisest and The Richest Still Lose

Lesson Goal:

To understand more of the vanity that Solomon witnessed in physical pursuits and make application in our lives today.

Text:

Ecclesiastes Chapter 2

Introduction

I once saw a bumper sticker on a car that read “*He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.*” I thought, though rather arrogant and self-serving, it was a brutally honest statement about how many people live their lives. Their approach to life is to accumulate things. Their motto: “the more I have, the happier I will be.” It wasn’t long after this that I saw a second bumper sticker that read “*He Who Dies With The Most Toys Still Dies.*” Touche’! Now with this I wholeheartedly agreed! In the end, Solomon would also agree and he was one of the richest men who ever lived. He had more toys than you and I can even imagine. Did it make him happy? Well, let’s read his journal entry and find out.

Notice all the things Solomon tried and the “toys” he accumulated in order to please himself (2:1-11): parties, pleasure, laughter, wine, houses, gardens, monuments to himself, servants, money (silver, gold), music, entertainment, etc., etc. Whew! What a list. And this is by no means a complete list. Finally he simply says “I tried everything!”

*“Whatever my eyes desired
I did not keep from them.
I did not withhold my heart
From any pleasure...”* (vs. 10)

Well, one would think, that this certainly had to be one happy man. He did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, for as long as he wanted. What a life. Many long for this type of life (some openly and some secretly). So how did Solomon sum up this great experience? VANITY!

*“Then I looked on all the works
that my hand had done
And on the labor in which I had toiled;
And indeed all was vanity
And grasping for the wind.
There was no profit under the sun”* (vs. 11).

Have you ever really, really, wanted something and once you got it... it didn't make you as happy as you thought it would? When I graduated from college I didn't have a car. However, I was blessed to get a job with a good company in the town where my parents lived. This (living with my parents) allowed me to save money and eventually buy a good used car. I had always wanted a nice sporty car and here I was: single, making good money, few expenses... so I bought a used Corvette. It was beautiful. Metallic Blue paint with black interior, t-top, low mileage, etc. Everything I had ever dreamed of in a car. I was pretty happy... for awhile. Then one day it occurred to me that I was still the same guy. The car had not made me cooler, or more handsome, or richer, or wiser, or happier. In the end it was just a car, a thing (with very expensive insurance). In chapter 5 verse 11, Solomon puts it this way: "... ***so what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes.***" Things will never make us happy! What a hard lesson to learn.

So Solomon turns back to wisdom (2:12-26) to find meaning and happiness in life. But this too is vanity because even the wisest person must die (vs. 16), eventually be forgotten (vs. 16) and leave all of their work to someone else and there is no telling if that person will be wise or a fool (vs. 17-21). Once again, Solomon throws up his hands in despair...

***“For all his days are sorrowful,
and his work burdensome;
even in the night his heart takes no rest.
This also is vanity”*** (vs. 23).

So what is one to do? Live and enjoy today! (vs. 24-26). God intends for us to work (Genesis 3:17-19). Enjoy the fruit that God has granted to you. Enjoy God's blessings while in this brief life. "*This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.*" Stop trying to accumulate things. They can never bring you true happiness. Enjoy the simple blessings, the small things; you will find your cup overflowing.

Questions For Discussion:

1. Define "happiness" in your own words. What really, honestly, makes you happy?
2. Why do you think so many people try to find happiness in acquiring things?
3. Sometimes we think that this carnal thinking is a recent thing, and we do live in a very materialistic world. But Solomon seemed to have the same temptations and he lived in the 10th century B.C. (almost 3000 years ago). Have things changed? In what ways?
4. Why did Solomon find it vanity to leave all he had toiled for "to the man who would come after me" (vs. 18)? Shouldn't we be glad to leave things to others?

5. Did Christ teach about the dangers of riches? Compare Matthew 13:22 and Luke 12:16-21 with Ecclesiastes 2.
6. Solomon tried to amuse himself with laughter and frivolity (vs. 1-2). In what ways is this vanity? Why can't we find lasting satisfaction there?
7. Solomon also tried drink (wine) as a way to find gratification (vs. 3). In what ways do alcohol and drugs make fools of us re: Proverbs 20:1
8. Sometimes it's hard for those seeking worldly things to get a good night's rest. Compare chapter 2 verse 23 with chapter 5 verse 12.
9. Satisfaction and contentment with what we have are also gifts from God. Compare and comment on 2:24 and Philippians 4:11-12.
10. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-9 and sum up what you have learned from Solomon in this chapter and the true secret to "great gain."

Making Application

Do you have goals for yourself? Perhaps you have goals to lose weight or exercise more or read the Bible this year, etc. Goals are good for us. They help us to focus on a few things instead of trying to do everything and not accomplishing anything. And it feels great when a very important goal is accomplished.

Whether or not you have goals, here is a challenge for you:

- Set yourself three goals
 - One goal to be accomplished this week (in 7 days).
 - One goal to be accomplished this month (in 30 days).
 - One goal to be accomplished in one year (in 12 months).
- Each goal must be a stretch... something hard but very important.
- Each goal must be attainable...do not set a goal to memorize the Bible.
- Each goal must be spiritual in nature. None of these goals should have anything to do with the physical: weight or appearance, clothes, food, job, cars, houses, education, etc.

Christ told us in Matthew 6:19-34 that if we seek God first, all of our physical needs will be met. First strive to be the best you can be spiritually. All of your other goals will then fall into proper order.

Remember: ***"Life is God's gift to me. What I do with my life is my gift to God."***

Ecclesiastes
Lesson Four
To Everything There Is A Season
Turn, Turn, Turn

Lesson Goal:

To understand how God has set in order everything on earth with purpose and meaning and a season.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Introduction

In the late 1950's the American Folk Musician, Pete Seeger, wrote a song titled "*Turn, Turn, Turn, To Everything There Is A Season.*" In 1965 it became a top 40 hit when it was recorded by the folk rock band, The Byrds. The lyrics for this song were taken essentially word for word from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes (King James Version). Seeger, later said that he only added 6 words to the Ecclesiastes text. Since Seeger wanted the song to be primarily used to promote peace, he simply added "I swear it's not too late" at the end of verse 8. Rather remarkable that a song that reached number 1 on the popular music charts was taken word for word from the Bible. I personally remember the song well. I was a teenager at the time and I remember one summer afternoon that my younger brother and I were listening to the local radio station in the small town where we lived when the DJ said he would give a copy of this record to the first caller who correctly identified the book of the Bible that contained the lyrics to this song. Well, my brother and I knew the answer so we called and got the 45rpm record. Thinking back, I'm not sure if that was a compliment to our Bible knowledge or an indictment of the general public's poor knowledge of the Bible.

What is this passage saying? This entry in Solomon's journal (the first 15 verses of chapter 3) is an interesting interlude between his frustration with the vanity of life (chapters 1 & 2) and continued observations of injustice and vanity under the sun. The tone in these verses is completely different from the rest of the book. It's as if the author steps back and takes a look at life and makes some positive observations about what he sees. There is order and purpose under the sun. It appears in everything around us: the world that God has ordered. There is a time and purpose for birth and death. Likewise there are seasons for planting and harvesting and resting. We know this is true. All we need to do is look around and observe. Winter may seem to be long this year but it will not last forever. Eventually, spring will come, the birds will sing, and it will be time for planting crops. This does not happen just occasionally but every year. It has happened every year since God's pronouncement after the flood (Genesis 8:22) and it will continue

to happen until the earth is no more (2 Peter 3:10-12). There is order and purpose under the sun but not of man's design.

This passage contains 14 observations of things that have been set in order to happen and the corresponding end or opposite. It begins with the most fundamental observation of life itself:

A time to be born.... And a time to die.

and ends with the most difficult decision facing nations:

A time of war.... And a time of peace.

Some observations:

vs. 2... ***“A time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted”***

The seasons have been set by God. There is order in the trees and plants and all vegetation. By observation we know when to plant and when to harvest. To plant in the summer or fall or winter will not produce a crop. In order to eat, we must observe and follow the order God has determined.

vs. 3... ***“A time to kill and a time to heal.”***

For the peaceful and the passive this may be difficult to understand. But, if there is a time for healing (and there is) there must also be a time for killing. If the leaders of England during the 1930's had listened to Winston Churchill, World War II could have been avoided or at the least greatly shortened. No one, besides Churchill, seemed to recognize Hitler as an insane monster determined to annihilate innocent people. He had to be stopped. Ignoring the obvious and hoping things would work out was not the answer. There was a time to kill and ultimately it would have saved thousands of lives.

vs. 3... ***“A time to break down and a time to build up.”***

There is a time to break down walls and barriers between people and nations. In my lifetime, the great wall in Berlin was torn down as communism crumbled. There is also a time to erect barriers for protection. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in about 445 B.C. it was with the expressed purpose to rebuild the wall around the city. The city was vulnerable. Under his leadership the wall was erected in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). We also need to build up each other individually. We can do this by encouraging one another and helping each other and we can do it by watching out for each other. The Shulamite's brothers in the Song of Solomon (8:8-9) determined they would protect their young sister from those who would seek to harm or take advantage of her. We all need friends and brothers like that.

vs. 4... ***“A time to weep and a time to laugh.”***

God has given us both of these emotions. There is a time to use them. We need to use them and not apologize. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). “A merry spirit does good, like medicine...” (Proverbs 17:22).

vs. 4... ***“A time to mourn and a time to dance.”***

Just as there are births and weddings and other happy occasions in our lives, there will also be deaths and partings and difficult times. This too is part of life under the sun. We will all have our share of parties and bereavements.

vs. 5... ***“A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones.”***

Many a farmer has spent days, weeks, and months pulling stones out of the ground and hauling them away. The soil might be fertile enough for a crop but if the stones are left

in the ground, there will be no crop...just broken plows. These same stones can be put to good use. They can be used to build a sturdy fence (though that is almost a lost art these days), or part of a foundation for a building or well. There is a time to remove the stones but there is also a time to gather the stones. The objects we curse today may be objects we need tomorrow. And the lessons we learn from patiently dealing with obstacles may be exactly the lessons we needed all along.

vs. 5... ***“A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.”***

Who doesn't like a good hug? Something about the embrace of another does wonders for the spirit. Later, in chapter 4, Solomon will talk about the value of a friend but here he simply states that, just as there is a time to embrace another, there is also a time not to embrace. When would that be? There are times in life when it's best to be alone. Christ spent hours alone in prayer and meditation. He had his apostles and others close to him (e.g. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and the apostle John) and I have no doubt that he warmly embraced them. But there were also times when he needed to be alone and so do we. If we are always leaning on someone else, we never really get to know ourselves or grow as we ought.

vs. 6... ***“A time to gain and a time to lose.”***

Oh how we often wish that life was only filled with gains (except around the waist). However, it is in our losses that we often experience our greatest gain. How do we handle rejection, poor health, or losing a job? How do we handle defeat? The best athletes learn from their defeats and come back stronger than ever. We will have gains but we will also have losses. Turn, turn, turn. *“In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed one as well as the other”* (7:14).

vs. 6... ***“A time to keep and a time to throw away.”***

Too often I have been too quick to throw away things I should have kept. What was I thinking? What would it be worth today if I had only held on to it? In our fast-paced world, there is a tendency to quickly evaluate things and discard them for the slightest reason. This primarily applies to material things but sadly also carries over into personal relationships. The breakdown of marriages and the rise in divorces is an example. Rather than keep one's vows and keep the wife of one's youth (Malachi 2:14) the covenant is broken and the marriage discarded. Commitment and faithfulness seem to be lost values. However, just as there is a time to keep there is also a time to throw away. When we put on Christ in baptism we must also put off (throw away) our old lives *“that you put off concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind”* (Ephesians 4:22-23).

vs. 7... ***“A time to tear and a time to sew.”***

Tearing and sewing apply to cloth or a garment. When would you tear a garment? When it is no longer useful. Tear it into strips and use it for rags. It is no longer of value. On the other hand, sewing implies saving or repairing a garment. Perhaps it has become ragged but, with the proper care, it can be salvaged and used a little longer. The trick is in knowing when to tear and when to sew. Is this “friend” pulling you back into old sinful habits? *“Get thee behind me Satan”* (Matthew 16:23). Has an old friend come back to you asking for forgiveness? *“For he is useful to me”* (2 Timothy 4:11). There is a time to tear and a time to sew and this does not just apply to garments.

vs. 7... ***“A time to keep silence and a time to speak.”***

“Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive” (Proverbs 17:28). We often get ourselves into trouble by

speaking too soon, too often, and with too many words (Proverbs 8:13; 10:19; Ecclesiastes 5:2-3). On the other hand, the thoughtful person shows restraint and, when they speak, they choose their words carefully. What a good feeling when one controls their tongue. So much harm can be avoided and so much good can be accomplished. But, just as there is a time to keep silent, there is also a time to speak. When error is being taught, or God's name is being profaned, or someone is being unjustly accused, then it is time to speak up. This takes courage but God will provide the strength if we do our part and speak up. To not speak up is to tacitly provide consent and agreement. Think about it.

vs. 8... ***“A time to love and a time to hate.”***

Some would say that with a christian there is no time nor place for hate. God says otherwise. It is obvious to any student of the Bible that God hates sin.

***“These six things Jehovah hates,
Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:
A proud look,
A lying tongue,
Hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that are swift in running to evil,
A false witness who speaks lies,
And one who sows discord among brethren.”***

Proverbs 6:16-19

If we hated sin as much as God hates it, sin would no longer be a problem in our lives. We are to love as God loves and we are to hate as God hates.

vs. 8... ***“A time of war and a time of peace.”***

It would be hard to find a leader of a country more devoted to peace than the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. Yet, when Lincoln was inaugurated in March of 1861, seven states had seceded from the union and the war to save the union and abolish slavery would soon begin. Was the war justified? Was it a time for war or a time for peace? Looking back now 150 years later, most historians agree that, as terrible and deadly as it was, the war preserved the young nation, it became even stronger, and our great president did the right thing in waging the war. War is a terrible thing but refusing to confront and fight evil will result in tragedy worse than war.

The above comments are just some observations on these amazing verses. Other more scholarly and thoughtful comparisons have been made so consider these as simple observations and add your own thoughts. As with all of His Word, God has given us marvelous truths to ponder. In the remainder of this passage (verses 9 – 15), Solomon suggests that man simply enjoy what God has given him and remember that God will require an account. Interestingly enough, the thoughts behind another popular song came from verse 11 in this passage. In 1970, Ray Stevens wrote a song titled “Everything is Beautiful in its Own Way.” It was a song about tolerance for others and became quite popular. Chapter 3 verse 11 reads: *“He has made everything beautiful in its time...”*

Questions For Discussion:

1. Which of the 14 comparisons found in verses two through eight, jumps out at you as most obvious? Why?
2. Which of the 14 comparisons do you struggle with the most? Why?
3. Why is it important for us to understand that God has created a time and purpose, and season for everything?
4. Can you live life more confidently knowing that God has set everything in order? In what ways?
5. How is eating and drinking and enjoying the good (fruit) of our work a gift from God? (verse 13)
6. Does Christ have anything to say about living today, trusting God, and not worrying about tomorrow? Compare verses 9-15 with Matt 6:33-34.
7. How would you interpret the phrase in verse 11 “He has made everything beautiful in its time.”
8. Verse 2 says there is “a time to be born, and a time to die.” Do we choose when we are born or when we die? For all the other comparisons on this list (vs. 2-8) we have to make choices. Although we do not choose when we live or when we die, we do choose how we live. Why is this important?

9. Verse 15 says that God requires an account of what is past (or what we pursue). How should this help us live (see also 12:14)?

10. Have you ever heard the song “Turn, Turn, Turn” by The Byrds? If not, you can find it through a Google search.

Making Application

Life is filled with choices. Everyday we decide when we will get up, what we will eat for breakfast, when we will leave for work, how we will treat others, etc. Some of the choices we make are good and some are not. Take a look at your choices tomorrow and consider what you are choosing and why. Are most of your choices selfish? In other words, “I’m going to do this because that’s what I want to do without consideration of others and the potential consequences.” Set yourself a goal to be less selfish in your everyday choices. Do at least one thing for someone else everyday and determine to be more spiritually minded too. Choose to do something for God everyday: study His word, teach His word, assist one of His children in need, etc. Remember that we will give account for our choices.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Five

Oppression, Toil, and Friendship

Lesson Objective:

To understand the vanity of injustice and work under the sun and to better understand the value of friendship.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 3:16 - 4:12

Introduction

Nearly everyday one can read in the news of some elected official taking a bribe to influence their legislative or judicial decisions. Without God in their lives, leaders lead selfishly and to satisfy their own selfish desires. The leaders lead righteously and the judges judge justly only if they first humble themselves before the almighty God. This is true, not only in the nations of men but also in the church. In today's journal entry, Solomon makes note of this and ponders why there is such corruption and injustice among men. Then he remembers that life without God is vanity. So the affairs of men are vanity as well without God. Corruption abounds because their hearts are not guided by God and they mistakenly think they will not give account.

*“Why do the wicked renounce God?
He has said in his heart,
‘You will not require an account.’”*
Psalm 10:13

But God **will** require an account and Solomon correctly observes that someday “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked” (vs. 17).

In the remainder of chapter 3 (vs. 18-22) Solomon considers the animal nature of man. If man does not retain God in his heart, how different is he from the animals?. Even though God has made man a little lower than the angels and has crowned him with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5), man much choose to retain this glory and honor. Otherwise he is no better than the animals who live for awhile, follow their passions, satisfy their appetites, then die and go back to the earth. Without God, how is man any better than this? With God there is purpose and meaning to life and man truly is crowned with glory and honor.

In verses 1-6 of chapter 4, Solomon considers widespread oppression and envy. He uses some form of the word “oppression” 3 times in verse 1. What is this oppression? Merriam-Webster defines oppression as “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.” Have you ever noticed how power corrupts? Without a moral compass (which can only come from God) man loses his way morally and “might makes right.” Once again, the

wise man observes that without God in their lives, man is corrupt. And the poor, through no fault of their own, are oppressed.

There is an answer to this oppression and emptiness. It's called friendship (vs. 7-12). When you welcome God into your life, you become less selfish and more concerned about others and their welfare. This unselfishness and compassion for others comes from above the sun and God calls it "love." The scriptures are filled with descriptions of love and commandments to love (1 John, 1 Corinthians 13, etc.) but nowhere are the benefits of this love for others more beautifully described than in these verses about friendship. What do you get in return for your concern for others?

1. A purpose for your labors (vs. 8).
2. Greater reward for your labor (vs. 9)
3. Someone to help you up when you fall (vs. 10)
4. Warmth when you are cold (vs. 11)
5. Strength to withstand (vs. 12).
 - Iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17)

A sermon could be written on each of these benefits of friendship. There is much to be learned in these verses. Consider the meaning of this passage and ask yourself if you are a friend to others. Friendship has its costs but what you get in return is far, far greater. Who wouldn't want: a purpose for your work, true value and profit for your labors, help when you fall, warmth when you are cold, and strength when you are weak? All these blessings are yours, but you must give yourself to others first and be a friend.

Questions For Discussion:

1. Why is there injustice in the world?
2. In what ways are people oppressed today?
3. What can you, as one Christian, do to combat injustice and oppression?
4. What is "envy?" Explain the lesson being taught about envy in vs. 4 of chapter 4.
5. Psalm 49 could be a companion reading to most of Ecclesiastes. Read this psalm and note any comparisons you see with Eccl. 3:16-4:12.

6. Compare Psalm 49:10-11 with Ecclesiastes 4:8.
7. Compare Psalm 49:12-15 with Ecclesiastes 3:16-22
8. What is a friend?
9. Chapter 4 verses 9-12 lists five benefits of friendship. Have you experienced any of these? Explain.
10. Can you think of any additional benefits of friendship not listed in these verses?

Making Application

Looking at your life, who has been your very best friend? Think of that person and list the qualities that made them such a good friend (e.g. dependable, good listener, etc.). Do you have these qualities? If not, what do you need to do to improve your friendship qualities?

Proverbs 18:24

“A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Six

How to Get a Good Night's Rest

Lesson Goal:

To understand the temporary nature of popularity and riches; to understand the foolishness of too many words.

Text:

Ecclesiastes 4:13 - 5:12

Introduction

In 1976 the rock band the Eagles released their album "Hotel California." A song from that album was released as a single in 1977 and became the #1 hit on Billboard. The song was titled "New Kid in Town." It was about the fleeting, fickle nature of romance and fame. One of the lines in the song goes like this: "*They will never forget you 'til somebody new comes along.*" The young men who wrote this song had a good idea that their fame and popularity would be a fleeting thing. No one stays number one forever. They could have been reading Solomon's journal. The wise preacher had this to say about fame, power and popularity:

*There was no end of all the people
Over whom he was made king;
Yet those who come afterward
Will not rejoice in him.
Surely this also is vanity
And grasping for the wind.*
(4:16).

So you want to be rich and famous? Be careful for what you wish. And be warned that fame and riches will not make you happy nor give meaning or purpose to your life under the sun. And even if they could make you happy, it is only for such a brief period of time. Who was the thirteenth president of the United States? Who had the number one music hit in 1959? Who won best actor in 1973? Who won the World Series in 2010? Who finished second in the Super Bowl in 2012? How soon we forget! We remember at the time and then it is yesterday's news.

Do you want in on a secret? It should not be a secret; it should be obvious but few seem to grasp it. Here it is: money and possessions will not make you happy. Solomon expresses it with these words:

*"He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver;
Nor he who loves abundance, with increase.
This also is vanity.*

***When goods increase, They increase who eat them;
So what profit have the owners
Except to see them with their eyes?”
(5:10-11)***

In his first letter to the young evangelist Timothy, the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to remind Christians that contentment is found in Godliness not in money and the love of money will lead to “all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:6-10). The 49th Psalm has this warning:

***“Do not be afraid when one becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
For when he dies he shall carry nothing away;
His glory shall not descend after him.”
(Psalm 49:16-17)***

Fame and riches are uncertain while we live and, more importantly, cannot go with us when we die. Will God be impressed if, when we die, we have a million dollars? No. But He will be impressed if we obey Him (Psalm 51:16-17).

Finally, not only are fame and fortune fleeting, they can also be bad for your health. They can keep you up and night, make you paranoid, give you headaches, raise your blood pressure, etc. etc. Doesn't sound like much fun does it? What about the one who simply trusts in God (whether times are good or bad)? Solomon puts it this way... he calls the man a “laboring man” and I think he (for all of his wealth and fame) was just a little envious of this common man:

***“The sleep of a laboring man is sweet,
Whether he eats little or much;
But the abundance of the rich
Will not permit him to sleep.”
(5:12)***

Questions For Discussion:

1. Why is popularity such a fleeting thing? What does Solomon say about popularity in verses 13-16 of chapter 4?
2. If we make a vow or promise to God, does He expect us to keep it? Should we be quick to make a vow or consider our words before we speak? Reference chapter 5 verses 1-7 in your answer. Can you think of any other scriptures concerning vows we make?
3. Why are our fleshly appetites never satisfied? See 5:10-11. Compare these verses with what Christ taught in Luke 12:13-21.

4. Why is the sleep of a laboring man sweet (5:12)?
5. Why is it difficult for a rich man to sleep (5:12)?
6. Compare Christ's teaching in Matthew 6:19-21 with Solomon's observations in Ecclesiastes 5:10-11.
7. Our words can get us into trouble. Explain in your own words the lesson being taught in 5:6-7.
8. Compare 5:6-7 with James 3:2-6.
9. Contrast the "poor and wise youth" with the "old and foolish king" found in 4:13-16. Why was the youth better than the king?
10. When we assemble to worship God, what should be our attitude (see 5:1)? Compare 5:1-7 with James 1:19-20.

Making Application

It is easy to get caught up in the race to "get ahead" and make more money. Before we know it most of our time and talents may be spent pursuing earthly things leaving very little time for God, the church, and our family. Keep track of your time this coming week. We all have the same amount of time in a week, how do we spend it? If you are like most people, out of the 168 hours in a week, you will spend 56 hours sleeping, 50 hours working and commuting. Another 20 hours a week eating, bathing/getting dressed and doing household chores. But that still leaves 42 hours a week (6 hours a day) for doing other things. What do you do with this time? How many hours a day do you spend with your children and husband or wife? Do you spend an hour a day in prayer and Bible study? 30 minutes? 10 minutes? Or do days go by without any prayer, meditation, or Bible study? Re-read Ecclesiastes 4:13 – 5:12 and think about the choices you are making and your priorities in life. As you do this, consider Christ's words in Matthew 6:33:

***"But seek first the kingdom of God
and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added to you."***

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Seven

Rich But All Alone

Lesson Goal:

To better understand what happens when one has riches but does not have compassion or a willingness to share with others.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 5:13 – 6:12

Introduction

While driving through the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee several years ago, I instinctively turned to the passenger in my car and remarked about the breathtaking beauty all around us. But I had no passenger. I was alone. I was talking to myself. It made me stop and think. The mountains were still there and they were just as beautiful but somehow, since I couldn't share that beauty with someone else, the moment wasn't complete. My joy certainly was not full. At that moment, I knew that I didn't want to be alone. And it wasn't just about the obvious benefits of companionship. It struck me that life was meant to be shared and that we will never know complete joy if we cannot share our blessings with others. Love needs an object (other than self).

In the 5th and 6th chapters of Ecclesiastes, Solomon makes these same observations. He talks about three different people in these verses. All three were rich in "under the sun" possessions and all three failed to find meaning, purpose, or lasting joy in their lives.

Riches kept for their owner's hurt:

In chapter 5 verses 13 through 17 Solomon describes a person who has great wealth but is a miser. He doesn't share his good fortune with others and one day, due to misfortune or bad business, he loses all of his wealth. Now he has nothing to share with his children or with others. While it was in his hand he chose not to share it. He kept it all to himself. What good did it do him? We may not have great wealth, but we all have blessings that we can share with others: our time, our care, our love, the gospel of Christ. We need to share what God has given to us today while we can. In the remainder of the chapter (vs. 18-20), Solomon observes that it is good to enjoy what you have while you have it. In other words, enjoy God's blessings today. We need to remember that not only do riches come from God but also *"...power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor – this is the gift of God."* Whether your portion is great or small (wealth is relative since to someone in the world, you are probably considered very rich), enjoy God's blessings today.

One who is rich but never gets to enjoy his riches:

In verses one and two of chapter six, Solomon describes another miser. It is interesting to note that not only does Solomon describe this problem (being a miser) as

“an evil” he also describes it as “common among men.” This man has been given much from God: riches, wealth, and honor. Make no mistake, all that we have comes from God. The rich man may think that he is self-made but it is God in heaven who has given him life, given him health, and allowed him to accumulate riches. God also gives us the power to eat or enjoy our wealth. This man was so busy accumulating that he never got to enjoy the fruit of his labor. In Luke 12:16-21 we find a very similar person. The farmer in Luke 12 seems to think he will live forever and will have plenty of time to enjoy his riches so he decides to build bigger barns. It doesn’t occur to him that God, who blessed him with abundance is the same God who gives and takes away life and, that night, he died.

The power to eat or enjoy our blessings is a gift from God. Neither the farmer in Luke 12 nor the rich man in Ecclesiastes 6 enjoyed their riches. In Ecclesiastes, the rich man’s wealth was not even enjoyed by his family but a “foreigner consumes it.” Was he too busy to have a family? Did he put his trust in a stranger and lose everything? We are not told but we do know that wealth without enjoyment is vanity.

One who is not satisfied with what he has; has no friends when he dies:

In verses three through six, we have the description of a man who has been richly blessed. *“If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years.”* The blessings of children and long life have long been held to be notable blessings from God. Here is a man who has been given much but he *“is not satisfied with goodness.”* What does this mean? Here is a man who has been given some of the greatest possible blessings (children, life, and health) but he wants something else. He does not understand the value of what he has. He is not satisfied with goodness. This is a common problem with mankind. **“Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied”** Proverbs 27:20.

What is the end result of such a life? One who is not satisfied or contented with goodness, is driven to find joy in other things. The result is they are chasing after the wind and will never find true joy and peace. And, since they chose not to honor their children and others in their life, when they die they are not honored or remembered either. They die alone and lonely.

In the final verses of chapter six, Solomon reminds us of the vanity of work. That’s not to say that we shouldn’t work **“whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might...”** 9:10. We should do our best in our work (2 Thessalonians 3:10) but not make our work our life’s purpose. This also is vanity.

Three very wealthy men. Three men consumed by their work and or their riches. Three men who either had no time for others or did not see the value in sharing time with others. Three unhappy, wasted lives. Three men very much like many of us. Vanity of vanity says the preacher. All is vanity.

Questions For Discussion:

1. In what ways might the love of riches cause problems for a Christian?
2. In Luke 12:16-21, Christ spoke a parable to his disciples about a rich farmer. What is the context for this parable? In other words, what prompted Christ to speak the parable (see verses 13-15)?

3. What was the lesson of the parable? What was the farmer's basic problem and sin?
4. Is the problem Christ described in the parable in Luke 12 common today?
5. What similarities do you see between the farmer in Christ's parable and the rich men described in Ecclesiastes 5:13 – 6:12:
6. In Ecclesiastes 6:1-2, what were the three things God gave this man?
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7. In Ecclesiastes 6:3, God blesses another man with two great blessings. What were they?
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8. It seems at times that the blessings described in 6:3 are easily taken for granted. Why do you think this is so?
9. Ecclesiastes 6:7 states that ***“all the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied.”*** Why does our physical labor to feed and clothe ourselves, not satisfy our souls? What is missing?
10. Why so much emphasis on the danger of money?

Making Application

Think of the happiest, most contented person, you have ever known. What was the source of their happiness? Were they very wealthy? Did they have a very important, prestigious job? Were they highly educated with several college degrees? Were they in a position of power and authority over others? Or was the source of their happiness something else? What about you? Are you seeking happiness and contentment in your life? Where are you seeking it?

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Eight

Beginnings and Endings

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the true value of seeing things through to the end and how this is better than the beginning.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

Introduction:

Just as Christ was about to take his final excruciating breath, as he was hanging suspended between heaven and earth on a cross, he uttered these last words: ***“It is finished!”*** (John 19:30). He had just completed the most remarkable journey in the history of the world. He (God) had taken on the form of a man, lived as a man, walked among His creation, taught perfect words of truth and life to those who would hear, showed man how he ought to live, prepared a way for salvation for those who would come after Him, lived perfectly in every way without a trace of sin, and finally died for all... both the righteous and unrighteous. His work was finished. He had endured to the end and, in the end, He had won!

Many in the religious world today celebrate a holiday called “christmas.” We do not read of christmas in God’s word. This holiday celebrates the birth of Christ. While Christ’s birth was remarkable in many ways, it pales when compared to His death. Christ’s miraculous entrance on earth by means of a virgin woman who was betrothed to a good hard working carpenter, was the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s Messianic promise to mankind. Although little noted at the time, we now can see the momentous importance of the birth of the Christ. And so, man created a holiday to commemorate His birth. Why didn’t God institute such a holiday or feast? Why instead did He institute a memorial (the Lord’s Supper) that celebrates Christ’s death, burial and resurrection not once a year but every Lord’s Day?

The answer can be found in Solomon’s wisdom: ***“The end of a thing is better than its beginning...”*** (Ecclesiastes 7:8). Many may begin a journey but only those who finish the journey enjoy the rewards at the end of the road. Beginnings are wonderful and fun and a time of celebration. The birth of a child is a happy occasion. Starting out on a trip or a vacation is an exciting time. The first day of school or starting a new job are times of optimism and great anticipation. Fun times! Why then does Solomon say that the ending is better than the beginning? What would have happened (regardless of His birth) if Christ had not done everything He had set out to do? What if somewhere along the way, He had become so discouraged and disappointed in men that He simply decided to quit and go back home to heaven? His birth would still have been miraculous and remarkable but its true value would have been lost without His completed life and death.

The significance of His birth was (and is) dependent on what came after it. The same is true for all of us. God has miraculously given us life. It is a wonderful and exciting time for our parents. But the true meaning and value of our life can only be determined when we die. What did we choose to do? How did we live? While we are living we are creating a “name” for ourselves. This name or reputation has little to do with money or education or social status. It has everything to do with the kind of person we choose to be. Are we kind, loving, fair, honest, and godly? Or are we self-centered, ungodly, hypocritical, unfair, and immoral? Our lives will tell who we are. And when we die, if we have chosen to live godly lives, the end of our lives (both for those who knew us and for ourselves) will be better than the beginning.

*“A good name is better than
precious ointment,
And the day of death than the
day of one’s birth.”*

Questions For Discussion:

1. In vs. 1 of chapter 7 Solomon says that a good name (or reputation) is better than precious ointment. Why is one’s reputation so valuable?
2. Compare Proverbs 22:1 with Ecclesiastes 7:1. If you could choose a good name (reputation) or riches, which would you choose? Why?
3. Verse 2 tells us that when we go to the house of mourning it should remind us of our mortality. Why is it important to live with the understanding that we will die? Should it change the way we live?
4. Compare Psalm 90:10-12 with Ecclesiastes 7:2
5. Can you think of any ways that the heart is made better through sorrow (verse 3)?
6. Read verse 10. It is easy and popular to get caught up in nostalgia. Our memories sometimes fool us into thinking that everything was better in the past. This verse says otherwise. What are your thoughts on this?

7. Verse 12 says that both wisdom and money can be used as a defense but that wisdom has an advantage. What is this advantage?
8. In what ways is the day of death better than the day of one's birth (7:1)?
9. Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. In these verses death is described as a victory. Who is victorious? What was the battle?
10. *The _____ of a thing is better than its _____...* (7:8). Fill in the blanks and consider the meaning of this statement.

Making Application

Have you ever started a project only to be sidetracked by something else, lose interest, be overwhelmed by "more important" tasks, not have enough time, etc.? We all probably have a list of things we have started and need to finish. On the other hand, how does it feel to start and finish an important project? Isn't that a great feeling? You have accomplished what you set out to do and this usually puts a smile on your face and a bounce in your step.

What about the most important project you will ever start? Your life. And, more specifically, your salvation. If you have allowed other things to take priority and side track you from your service to God, get back on track now! You can do it! Resolve to make this the top priority in your life everyday. If you do, when you draw your last breath, you can confidently say along with your savior "*it is finished!*"

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Nine

Prosperity and Adversity

Lesson Goal:

To better understand how God works in our lives and that, regardless of whether we prosper or suffer loss, God is with us.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 7:13 – 8:1

Introduction:

Why is it so often the case that wicked people prosper while good people suffer injustice? This is one of the more difficult questions in life and a question that also troubled Solomon. The story of Job deals with this question at length and Job's friends fall into the trap of assuming that suffering is always a result of one's own sin. We (and Job's friends) learn that is not the case. Even Job eventually questions God's justice only to be reminded by God of how little he knows about life (which he sees) so who is he to question God's justice and the things he cannot see (Job 38 – 40). Solomon sums it up by saying that when things are going well, be happy and thankful. When you suffer adversity "**consider that God has appointed the one as well as the other**" (7:14). In other words, God is in control. Don't worry too much about the injustice you see or the adversity you face. Try to keep your emotions in balance: don't get too high when things are going well and don't get too low when times are hard. God is still in control. Remember that our Lord will "*never leave you nor forsake you*" (Hebrews 13:5). And, "*He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust*" (Matthew 5:45).

Through it all Solomon says, seek wisdom. It will strengthen you more than ten rulers (vs. 19). It will sustain you when others gossip about you (vs. 21-22). It will keep you from the trap of deceitful people (vs. 25-26). And it will make your face shine even in the hardest times (8:1). Keep an even keel. Life is filled with many ups and downs. Make God your rock and you will not be moved.

Questions For Discussion:

1. How can adversity help a Christian to grow stronger?
2. Can prosperity sometimes lead to problems for the Christian? If so, in what ways? Consider 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

3. Which do you think is more difficult for a Christian to handle: prosperity or adversity?
4. Why, in many instances, do the wicked, immoral, and dishonest people prosper?
5. Hebrews 12:3-11 talks about the sufferings of a Christian. Considering this passage, in your own words, give some reasons why a Christian might suffer and encounter hardship.
6. How does wisdom provide strength (7:19)?
7. "...God has made man upright, but they have sought out many _____" (7:29). What do you think this means?
8. "Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?" (7:13) Does God's work need correcting? Do we have the power to straighten out what God has done?
9. In what ways can wisdom change our outward appearance? See (8:1).
10. What advice is God giving us in verse 14? Is this easy to do? Why or why not?

Making Application:

Wisdom is rare (vs. 28). That's one reason it is so valuable. Read Proverbs 3:13-18 and consider the value of wisdom. Make a list of all the good things this passage says comes from wisdom. Verse 13 begins with "***Happy is the man who finds wisdom...***" and verse 18 ends with "***and Happy are all who retain her.***" The wisdom described in these verses is not "under the sun" wisdom. It is from God (verses 5-6). Resolve to be that exceptional, rare person who listens to God and finds true wisdom. Regardless of the storms that come your way, you will have a peaceful life. Christ lie sleeping in the boat as the storms crashed over the Sea of Galilee because He listened to and completely trusted His Father. The waves could not consume Him and neither can they consume us if we believe. "***Her ways are pleasantness, and all her paths are peace***" (v 17). Be wise. Be at peace. Remember... if we listen to God's words of wisdom...

***"When you roam, they will lead you;
When you sleep, they will keep you;
And when you awake, they will speak with you."***

Proverbs 6:22

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Ten

The King and Death

Lesson Goal:

To understand the importance of patience, obedience, and respect when dealing with those in authority. To understand the importance of swiftness when executing a sentence but also the certainty of God's judgment.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 8:2-17

Introduction:

When treated unfairly, most of us want vengeance or restitution. However, God tells us to be patient when persecuted and to not seek vengeance. ***“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”*** (Romans 12:19). In this entry in his journal, Solomon offers similar wise counsel: keep the command of the king. Obey those who have authority over you. ***“Because for every matter there is a time and judgment...”*** You may be under a good king or an evil king. Obey them anyway. Do not resist the authority. Ultimately there is only one authority and He is always in control (Romans 13:1).

Death is an example of man's powerlessness. Regardless of how rich and powerful one may be, he has no control over death. ***“No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death.”*** The rich and famous, the poor and unknown all have the same fate. The good king and the bad king both die and will give account to God the righteous judge. If we can observe this great equalizer, death, shouldn't it cause us to stop and think how God also is in control in other ways that we do not see? We must resist the temptation to “make things right” ourselves. We need to wait for God's judgment. It is coming to everyone and it will be swift and fair.

Solomon also makes an observation about man's judgment and the failure to swiftly execute a sentence. ***“Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (8:11).*** How often have we seen this to be the case? When I was a child and did something I should not have done, my punishment from my parents was immediate. This was not always the case with friends of mine. Sometimes their parents would threaten to do something but not follow through or give them endless “warnings” which eventually meant very little. I am glad my parents were swift and fair in meting out punishment. ***“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”*** (Hebrews 12:11). Punishment delayed only encourages more disobedience. We need only look at the crime rate in our country to see this is so.

Questions For Discussion:

1. According to Romans chapter 13, are we to obey the government even if it is corrupt? Are there any limits to our obedience?
2. Were the christians in the first century persecuted by the government? How were they to respond? (see Revelation 2:10)
3. When asked in Matthew 22:15-22 about paying taxes to Caesar what was Christ's response? Should that be our attitude today?
4. What were Peter's instructions to christians who suffer injustice at the hands of others (1 Peter 4:12-16)?
5. What message is sent to the criminal when a sentence is not speedily executed (8:11)?
6. The phrase "eat, drink, and be merry" is found in verse 15. What do you think this means? Is it a good approach to life? (be sure and look at the surrounding verses – especially verse 14).
7. Compare verse 17 in this chapter with Isaiah 55:8-11. Are there things in life that we will just not understand? Is it best to leave these things to God?

8. All die. Compare the death of the wicked with the death of the righteous using Ecclesiastes 8:8 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-57.

9. In this passage in Ecclesiastes and in 1 Corinthians 15, death is described as a battle or war. It is our final battle. Comment on how this final battle will bring justice to those who have prospered through wickedness. Hint: judgment and punishment may be delayed (vs. 11) but they cannot be avoided (***“there is no release from that war”***).

10. Psalm 82 is a psalm that pleads for justice in the world. As you read this psalm notice the similarities between it and the passage in Ecclesiastes we have studied.

Making Application:

Demonstrating patience is difficult for most of us. There is also a fine line between being patient and simply procrastinating (putting off doing something). How do you handle crises? When faced with difficult problems such as losing your job, or being the object of gossip, what is your first reaction? Do you lash out (perhaps unfairly) trying to “get back” at others? Or do you avoid confronting the situation completely? Try a different approach. The next time (and we have plenty of trials in life) you are unfairly treated, before you do anything else, pray. Some advise to count to 10 before you respond in the heat of the moment. This is good advice but go further by also using prayer (a request for God’s help) as a means to help you through the crisis. Nehemiah and his prayer before he answered King Artaxerxes is a good example for all of us (Nehemiah 2:4). Try it.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Eleven

Do It With Your Might

Lesson Goal:

To understand the importance of working hard and doing our best with our earthly pursuits.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 9

Introduction:

One of my favorite sports stories is the story of Billy Mills. He won the gold medal in the 10,000 meter run at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan in what has been called one of the biggest upsets in Olympic History. In the eyes of the world, the 10,000 meter run is one of the elite prizes in all of track and field (along with the 100 meter dash and the marathon) and no U.S. athlete had ever won this event. That makes Billy Mills' accomplishment all the more inspiring. Billy Mills, a Sioux Indian from South Dakota ran collegiately for the University of Kansas, and was literally an unknown on the international track and field scene. After college, he went into the Marine Corps where he posted times fast enough to qualify him for the Olympics but he had no experience at international events. Each entrant in the 10,000 meter run had to qualify for the finals through a set of preliminary races. He qualified for the finals but just barely. His qualifying time was nearly a minute slower than the time posted by Ron Clarke of Australia who was the world record holder and the overwhelming favorite to win the gold. During the gold medal race, Mills was able to stay close to the leaders right up to the final lap but he was still mostly unnoticed as Clarke and Tunisia's Mohammad Gammoudi jostled for the lead. Going outside of Clarke and Gammoudi on the final turn, Mills found a burst of energy in the last 100 meters and sprinted past his two surprised competitors. They desperately fought to catch him but could not. He broke the tape with a new Olympic record time of 28 minutes and 24 seconds. He had run the last 400 meters in under 60 seconds. A stunned crowd could not believe their eyes. Mills' notoriety was so low that a news person ran up to him after the race and said "Who are you?" Through all of the Olympics since 1964, still no other American has won this Olympic race. Billy Mills stands alone.

That's an inspiring story but what is the connection to Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes chapter nine? I would like for you to remember two points from Billy Mills' story. First, you don't have to be famous to win. Billy Mills was unknown but that didn't stop him. He has inspired thousands to try harder. I have a poster of him, breaking the tape in Tokyo, hanging in our basement exercise room. I never met Billy Mills but he still inspires me. Second, "do it with your might." When asked later about the race, he said he kept telling himself over and over that he could win. Whatever the odds, even if no one else believes you can do it. Keep running! And give it all you've got. The results just might surprise you.

Our lives “under the sun” are very brief. In James 4:14 our lives are described as a vapor that appears for a while then vanishes away. Grasping the significance of life’s brevity, Solomon urges us to live with our might. What an inspiring anthem to live by. The phrase “under the sun” is used six times in this short chapter. “Under the sun” of course refers to life on earth as opposed to life “above the sun” which is heavenly. So, when we read the phrases “the dead know nothing” or “there is no...knowledge...in the grave” we understand that the dead know nothing about this life anymore and there is no more knowledge of this life when we go to our grave. That does not mean there is no knowledge in the grave, just not any more knowledge of earthly things. This is consistent with what Christ taught in Luke 16:19-31. In this passage, Christ taught about the lives of two men: one a beggar (named Lazarus) and one a rich man (not named). Both had died and were in the Hadean world awaiting final judgment. The rich man, being in great torment, wanted Abraham to send Lazarus back to his family to warn them and to urge them to change their lives while they still could. While the rich man could remember earthly things: how he once lived, how his brothers lived, etc. it is apparent that his “knowledge” was limited to what he remembered, he had no knowledge of current happenings and he no longer could contact or have any influence over earthly events. Hence the importance of living today... every minute... with our might.

This chapter is packed with wisdom about living under the sun. Following are some of the key points found in this entry in Solomon’s journal.

- One thing happens to everyone: death – vs. 3
- As long as there is life, there is hope – vs. 4
- Once you die, you no longer share anything under the sun – vs. 6
- Rejoice: eat, drink, and be merry – vs. 7
- Live joyfully with your wife – vs. 9
- Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might – vs. 10
- Time and chance happen to all – vs. 11
- Wisdom is better than strength – vs. 16
- The poor man’s wisdom is despised – vs. 16
- One sinner destroys much good – vs. 18

A sermon could be delivered on each of these points. There is so much packed into this chapter; so much wisdom. Death is certain, so verses one through nine emphasize the importance of truly living each day. Enjoy whatever God has given you, enjoy the little things, enjoy the big things, enjoy others, and especially enjoy your wife. Enjoy life! These thoughts build to a resounding conclusion in verse 10 ***“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”*** This is it folks. You have one life. Live it with all of your might! We all will make mistakes along the way but may it never be said we failed for lack of effort.

Each of us has the potential to run and win that one big race just like Billy Mills in the 1964 Olympics. We may not be well known or showered with praise now but we run in pursuit of a crown nonetheless (1 Cor. 9:24-25). Not an earthly garland or medal that will fade but we run for an eternal crown that, in ten thousand years, will be just as bright and shining as the day it was placed on our head (2 Tim. 4:7-8). We run with endurance the race set before us (Hebrews 12:1). We run to win. Do it with your might!

Questions For Discussion:

1. To what does the phrase “under the sun” refer?
2. In verse three Solomon says that there is one thing under the sun that happens to all. What is this?
3. How does knowing that we will die provide an incentive to live?
4. Verse five says that the living know they will die but the dead know nothing. What does it mean that the dead “know nothing?” Is there no awareness or consciousness after death?
5. The white garments and head anointed with oil in verse eight, represent a festive spirit. Why the commending of festivity?
6. ***“Enjoy life with the wife whom you love”*** (vs 8 ESV). Many today would do well to follow this simple advice. Compare the message in this verse to Malachi 2:14.
7. Verse eleven lists some things that occur under the sun that are not what one would expect. What do you think is the message for us in this verse?
8. Verses thirteen through eighteen contain a parable about a poor wise man who saved a little city. List three things that you learned from this parable.

9. Verse ten names four things that are not to be found in the grave. What are they?
10. Verse four is a good verse to remember when you are counseling a friend who is depressed. It is also a good verse to remember when you are hurting and feeling overwhelmed with life's burdens. ***“But for him who is joined to all the living there is _____...”*** Fill in the blank and consider what it means.

Making Application:

What are your goals in life? If your primary goal is to serve God, are there secondary goals that you would also like to accomplish? What is holding you back? Time, money, health, or? For most of us this becomes a list of excuses for not doing things and not legitimate reasons. We all know of people who had very little but accomplished great things. No earthly pursuit should come before serving God and, whatever we do needs to be for good, but whatever our secondary pursuits may be: sports, work, education, etc., we should give them our all. Nothing in God's Word says that we should not enjoy the life He has given us here on earth. What will you do today to live with your might?

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Twelve

Wisdom and Diligence

Lesson Goal:

To understand the importance and benefits of wisdom and diligence.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 10:1-11:8

Introduction:

What is wisdom? This has been one of the central themes of Ecclesiastes and now, as the preacher draws his treatise to a conclusion, he focuses specifically on this critical issue. Through the ages, philosophers, religious leaders, and kings have struggled to define or describe this great and much desired quality. True wisdom may be one of those things that is hard to define but clearly recognized when seen. God, in chapter ten of Solomon's journal provides us with no fewer than sixteen examples of wisdom. These are presented as proverbs that contrast wisdom with folly. Briefly described, they are:

1. A little folly can do great damage to one's reputation (vs. 1).
2. A wise man's heart and character provide him strength. The foolish man's character is weak (vs. 2).
3. Your actions show your true character. Your walk says a lot about you (vs. 3).
4. In time of trouble, stay true to yourself and to others (vs. 4).
5. When the fool gets promoted over the wise, do not be alarmed. This is part of life and vanity under the sun (vs. 5-7).
6. If you are laying traps for others or being dishonest, your deceit and wickedness will come back to bite you (vs. 8).
7. Be honest in your work lest you are hurt by your own words or deeds (vs. 9).
8. Wisdom is like a sharpened ax or saw. With it the task is completed through much less effort (vs. 10).
9. Be wary of those who talk a lot and use great flowing words (vs. 11).
10. Your words reveal whether you are wise or a fool (vs. 12-13).
11. A fool likes to speak many words about what will be when neither he nor anyone else has this knowledge (vs. 14).
12. A little work wearies the fool. Even the most simple task is great labor for him (vs. 15).
13. Strength and nobility in the land are the result of mature and honorable leaders (vs. 16-17).
14. Laziness leads to the neglect of things needing to be maintained (vs. 18).
15. There is celebration in the day of prosperity (vs. 19).
16. Do not curse those over you. Do not covet (vs. 20).

Wisdom and folly are described in these verses. Wisdom is not a theoretical quality but something that must be part of the fabric of one's life. Wisdom is practiced daily or it is not true wisdom. This understanding of wisdom leads to a second quality that needs to go hand in hand with wisdom. This quality is diligence and it is described in the first eight verses of chapter eleven.

To be diligent is to persevere and remain steadfast at one's task. When the task is hard, there is the temptation to quit but the one who is diligent remains at his post and does not cease from his labor. Diligence is such a great virtue because "you do not know." This phrase "you do not know" is used four times in five verses in this passage. The message is clear.

- Be kind and generous to others, especially the poor. Your kindness will return to you (vs. 1).
 - For "**you do not know**" how desperately goodness is needed to offset the evil that is in the world (vs. 2).
- Be diligent, stop procrastinating, get busy and sow your seed (vs. 4 & 6) for "**you do not know**" even the most basic things of life today (vs. 5). How then do you presume to know what God has planned for tomorrow? For "**you do not know**" which will prosper (vs. 6).

Diligence requires trust. As a Christian, one must trust in God. Our job is to believe Him, obey Him, and keep His commandments (John 4:15). It is not our job to constantly question Him. Wisdom is respecting the one who has authority and being diligent in our work. If we are faithful, one day we WILL know.

Questions For Discussion:

1. How would you define or describe wisdom?
2. Why is wisdom valuable?
3. Is having wisdom dependent on education, or wealth?
4. From where does wisdom come?
5. "***In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for _____ which will prosper...***" Fill in the blanks and consider the meaning.

6. What is diligence?
7. Why is diligence important?
8. From where does diligence come?
9. ***“Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will _____ after many days.”***
Fill in the blanks and consider the meaning of this verse. Hint: In scripture the word “waters” sometimes refers to people or multitudes (see Revelation 17:1, 15 and Isaiah 58:7).
10. ***“He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds _____.”*** Fill in the blanks. What is the application for us today?

Making Application:

Do you have wisdom? How do you know? Wisdom is not something with which we are born. It is something that must be acquired. Wisdom will be seen in our lives just as folly will also be seen (look at the list of sixteen examples in this lesson). Solomon asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3: 7-13). We are instructed to ask for wisdom from God (James 1:5-8). Determine to be wise. Start by humbling yourself and looking to God (the source of all good things) to help you. Ask God for wisdom and you will be wise.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson Thirteen

The Conclusion of the Whole Matter

Lesson Goal:

To understand the true purpose for my life.

Lesson Text:

Ecclesiastes 11:9 – 12:14

Introduction:

How would Solomon conclude this beautiful book on wisdom and life under the sun? What final words of advice would he offer? The final entry in the preacher's journal is the most compelling. With words, he paints a beautiful picture of the journey of life: from childhood to maturity, to old age, to death. And, framing each step of the journey, are the answers (no more questions) to making life meaningful.

To those beginning the journey his message is quite simple: rejoice, remove, and remember. "Rejoice" in the beauty, energy, and strength of youth for it passes quickly. "Remove" sorrow from your heart for this is a time of joy and promise. Most of all "remember" God your creator for, when the difficult days come, you will need Him. You pass this way only once so live every moment fully and live it with Him.

The author's poetic lines in the first seven verses of chapter twelve are some of the most beautiful lines ever written by man. Their beauty transcends man's wisdom and literature. They offer a stark but tender view of life in its final years under the sun. This is reality. All grow old but old age is not to be dreaded. There is beauty in every stage of life. Rather, old age is to be understood as the final stage of our journey and the reality expressed in these verses is that, in this stage of life, our physical abilities are greatly diminished. They have been used up. They are nearly gone. "Remember" this before the silver cord is loosed or the golden bowl is broken. And, most importantly, remember that when this body is finally completely used up, "the spirit will return to God who gave it."

I once had a professor in a communications class who said that at the end of each class you, the student, should ask "so what?". What did I learn from this class today? What was the point? What can I apply? This was her way of reminding us as students and teachers that there should always be a purpose for the lecture, class, or assignment. And this purpose should not be a mystery but clearly understood by every student. What one or two things do I want to be sure the students take away from this class? Over the years I have tried hard to follow this rule in the classes I have taught. I have not always been successful but this still, small voice keeps prodding me to ask "so what?".

The final seven verses of this beautiful book are Solomon's answer to "so what?". It is as though he is saying "if you remember nothing else from all I have said, remember this." First, remember that all is vanity. Everything in this life under the sun is passing

away. It has no lasting value. So stop acting as though it will last. Secondly, in spite of the vanity, there is wisdom and truth to be found. Just be careful where you seek it. There is no end to the wisdom and philosophies of men and studying them becomes very wearisome. True wisdom comes from above. It is found in the proverbs written by men inspired by God. These are like skilled craftsmen who patiently assemble words of truth. This truth is well crafted, solid, and will not fall apart when the storms come. Truth and wisdom are found in God's word. Let it admonish you. Let it guide you. Let it deliver you from the vanity all around. And lastly, if all could be summed up in one final statement, what would it be?

“Fear God and keep His commandments.”

This is man's duty under the sun. If we do this all will be well. If we fail to do this all will be lost. Because one day we will die and the one who created us and gave us life will require an account for what we have done.

What about you? Are you ready to face God and give an account for your life? He does not require perfection of us (He has provided a sacrifice for our sins) but He does require obedience. This is your duty. This is what life is all about.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why are the young to rejoice in their youth (11:9)?

2. What is it that the young are to remove from their heart (11:10)? Why?

3. Who are the young to remember in their youth (12:1)? Why?

4. What is being described in chapter 12 verses 2-7?

5. Compare and contrast Genesis 2:7 with Ecclesiastes 12:7.

6. What are the four objects mentioned in chapter 12, verse 6?
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7. What do you think the objects in verse 6 might represent?

8. Even though the conclusion is that life under the sun is vanity (vs. 8), all is not lost. The preacher kept on preaching. What did he teach the people (vs. 9-10)?

9. Compare verses 10-11 with 2 Timothy 2:15.

10. How would you sum up Solomon's conclusions (verses 13 & 14)?

Making Application:

Are you frustrated with life? Do you feel like you are at the end of your rope with no place to turn? If so, then what you are experiencing is life without God. To find meaning and purpose in life we must have God. To gain true joy and peace in life we need God. There is a void in each of our lives that cannot be filled with anything but God. Stop listening to the philosophers of the world who say that there is no God or that you do not need God. Listen to the one who made you, knows you, and loves you. He will bring peace and purpose to your life that you never thought possible and, when this life ends, He will welcome you home to a world of everlasting peace and joy. Fill the void in your life today. ***Fear God and keep His commandments*** (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). This is your purpose in life.

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