

Notes for Lesson 8 “What Can Ecclesiastes Teach Us About Contentment?”

“**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**” “I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving (or chasing) after wind. (1:1, 11)

Contentment in large measure is dependent upon our ability to properly estimate the “vanity” of life “under the sun.” To learn this skill is to “gain a heart of wisdom” (Psa. 90:12).

Life is inscrutable without the aid of wisdom, without a Biblical worldview. It is a vain, dead end pursuit to try to figure out one’s purpose in life apart from “the fear of the LORD” which is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 111:10)

Vanity means: Does it mean meaningless? (NIV) If it has no meaning then why even write about it or discuss it? Why even ask what it means? How can any word mean meaningless, have no meaning? Is that not ultimate absurdity? Is Ecclesiastes ultimately absurd?

Vanity is: Emptiness. Futility. Like chasing after the wind. Vacuous. Light. Nothingness. A wisp of wind. The nearest thing to zero. Unsubstantiality. Carries no weight. A deceptive lie or promise. Illusory. A disappearing mist. Repetitious nonsense. (That’s 15 synonyms!) Is it vanity to define vanity?

What Bible student has not experienced the thought: ‘It is a vain thing to try and understand the message of Ecclesiastes’?

Vanity (from Reformation Study Bible) “The Hebrew word translated ‘vanity,’ which occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes, means ‘breath,’ ‘vapor,’ or ‘fleeting,’ and in the context of the book refers to that which is frustrating, temporary, or perplexing. ‘Vanity of vanities’ is a Hebrew way of expressing the superlative. The Preacher is here clearly using hyperbole to encourage the reader to face the vanity of life. Elsewhere in the book, he commends finding satisfaction, the opposite of frustration in life, and presumes that the reader will understand and not be perplexed by his message.” Does ‘finding satisfaction’ in that statement imply learning contentment?

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10; 6:3; 6:7. What words do you find common to all three?

Who is “Madam Bubble?” Hint - It is the name given to an allegorical woman by the same author who wrote about the town of Vanity Fair.

The Bible helps us understand the meaning of ‘vanity’ when it tells us it is ‘like striving to grasp or to chase after the wind’.

Ecclesiastes 1:17 “And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind.” In Ecclesiastes 1:13 what phrase is found that makes a comparison to things “under the sun”? See also 2:3 and 3:1.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 “Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 2:17 "So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind."

Ecclesiastes 2:26 "For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind."

Ecclesiastes 4:4 "I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of* rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind."

Ecclesiastes 4:6 "One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind."

Ecclesiastes 4:16 "There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind."

Ecclesiastes 6:9 "What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind." See Hosea 12:1 - "Ephraim feeds on wind, and pursues the east wind continually."

"Consider what God has done: Who can make straight what He has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future."

This is the verse which gave birth to Thomas Boston's The Crook in the Lot, Ecclesiastes 7:13-14.

Of these verses Burroughs writes: When you fail to set the mercies and afflictions side by side to compare them and make the mercies great and the afflictions small, "If you do not make the mercies of God help you against your murmuring, you will make them aggravations of the sin of murmuring."

For instance, suppose a man knows excellent health for 70 years, but the last two years are years of extreme pain. What shall he do? "O, LORD, I have undeservedly enjoyed decades of health. Now in these final years You have given pain. Shall I not marvel that You have been good to me for so long? Shall I murmur and complain about a few short days before I am called to see You face to face?"

To "walk with God" as Enoch and Noah did, it is necessary to discern what He is doing in Providences and then to join Him in His pattern and goals, be it either mercy or affliction. The goal of mercy is to make us grateful and able to be generous. The purpose of affliction is to humble us.

The sinner possesses no capacity to experience lasting enjoyment. ***It is the purpose of God to make life inscrutable for the sinner. He cannot make straight what God makes crooked.***

Solomon was a very rich and prosperous man who knew his share of trouble. The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment speaks of “the burden of prosperity.”

Consider: “One who comes into Christ’s school to be instructed in this art of contentment never attains to any great skill in it until he comes to understand **the burden that is in a prosperous condition.**”

1. There is a ***burden of trouble***. He that will be rich pierceth himself through with many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10) **Things are not as they seem.** For instance, “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6:9). When you really get to know the rich, when you spend time in their world, you see what was otherwise not seen. They have many troubles that you know nothing of.

2. There is the ***burden of danger***. The rich are subject to many temptations that other men are not subject to. “The devil tempts every man, but the idle man tempts the devil.” Every man by nature desires to be “made much of,” but it is a snare. How easy it is to make much of the celebrity. “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to ever the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:23, 24) See also Eccl. 5:12, 13; James 3:1.

3. There is the ***burden of duty***. “You look only at the sweetness and comfort, the honor and respect that they have who are in a prosperous position, but you must consider the duty that they owe to God. God requires more duty at their hands than at yours.” RHIP - RHIR The captain of a ship has the most spacious cabin, but...

4. There is the ***burden of account***. We are all stewards. All will give account for their own souls. What of the father, of the minister, of the mayor, the governor, the Supreme Court Judge, the King? Think of the President and Legislator that would declare war on another nation, or the President who signs a bill requiring doctors to perform abortions or sexual altering surgeries on minor children. “To whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 24:48)

“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (James 2:5)

Listen to Burroughs in his “How to be Full” sermons. “It is better to know how to honor God with those good things I have than to know how I can get more. It is better to know how I might behave myself in the enjoyment of those good things God has given me than to know how to get more of those good things.” “It is a better lesson for one to learn how to honor God in fullness than it is to learn how he can get full.” (page 10) Compare this sentiment to the prosperity gospel. Take those thoughts into next week’s discussion.

If Ecclesiastes teaches us anything, it instructs us **not to expect lasting satisfaction from things that can never satisfy the human soul.** In that respect it is a book of “good news” (provided one understands the “bad news” before the “good news” sounds “good”).

Solomon teaches us to “fear God” as the essence of a contented life.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him.

Ecclesiastes 5:7 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

Ecclesiastes 7:18 It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

Ecclesiastes 8:12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.

Ecclesiastes 8:13 But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14 The **conclusion**, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. See 2 Corinthians 5:10. Paul quotes Solomon here for the New Testament believer. Our works when revealed in God's judgement will be either good or "worthless." "Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord..."

"All is vanity." But "All" is not vanity. Otherwise, there would be no ethical or moral instruction given by Solomon. See Chapter 5 for example. "All" that is done, if it is done only "under the sun" and apart from the fear of the LORD, is ultimately vain. The wise person lives with the knowledge that God is watching and evaluating our every act, thought, and attitude in the light of His holiness, and that He will bring "all" into judgment. But for the redeemed this is not a fearful curse, but a stimulus to demonstrate love for the Redeemer. The "fear of the LORD" is reverent love, and profound honor expressed by ardent worship and joyful obedience.

When we pray, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" we ask that "God would by His Spirit take away from ourselves and others all blindness, weakness, indisposedness, and perverseness of heart; and by His grace make us able and willing to know, do, and submit to His will in all things, with the like humility, cheerfulness, faithfulness, diligence, zeal, sincerity, and constancy, as the angels do in heaven" (WLC, q. 192).

For Discussion:

1. What are some of the things that Solomon tells us are vain pursuits? Have you tried any of them? What did you learn?

2. What '*crooks*' (unexpected, unpleasant detours to your plans or places) has God presently placed in your '*lot*' (the reception of His Providences)? Have you accepted them willingly? Are you 'kicking against the goads'? Do you pray that they might change in the future? Are you working to change them now? Are you surrendered to them as crosses that He has assigned for your good? How does HOPE (remember last week's discussion) figure into your response?