

We live in a time of great contrasts in terms of economic prosperity and personal well-being. On one hand some enjoy a life of relative safety and peace with good incomes and a hope for a prosperous life. On the other hand there are some who fear for their very lives - living in a hand to hand existence not knowing what the future holds for them. Many times we read of great tragedies that happen to innocent people and we wonder what's the point of all of this great disparity in happiness, prosperity and misery, personal tragedy and abject poverty. Solomon, the wisest man in history apart from the Lord Himself, had lived a very full life. Tragically, at one point he had departed from the Lord. Eventually, the Lord disciplined Solomon resulting in the fracturing of Israel as a nation. But the Lord wasn't through with Solomon. At some point Solomon was restored in right enough relationship with the Lord so that he could exercise his theopneustic gift¹ and write the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is a compilation of Solomon's thoughts as he went through Divine Discipline and afterward, was restored in his relationship with the Lord but had to live with the consequences of disobedience and sin in his life. Read in this context Ecclesiastes is a gut-retching account of a man who had fallen from great heights of wisdom and prosperity to a desperate soul-searching of the good, the bad, and the ugly in his life and the conclusions he made at the end of his life.

It is very important to note that many have downplayed the divinely inspired nature of this book. This is wrong. We should note that Ecclesiastes has some very important biblical truths for us. Let us not "write off" Ecclesiastes as a book to avoid because of its emphasis on futility for if there is a time when the futility of life is an issue with many - today is that time. Ecclesiastes offers the sinner a great opportunity to be challenged by the futility of life apart from Christ and lead him to his Creator for the answer. It's a good book for the Christian also. Many times unexplained tragedy comes into the life of a Christian or perhaps difficulties induced by his own waywardness plague him - Ecclesiastes presents God's truth to all of us as we deal with the multifaceted circumstances that face us in the here and now.

The Futility of Life Contrasted with the Goodness of God.

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, [25] for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? [26] To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Eccles. 2:24-26

Life apart from a proper relationship with the Lord is futile. Although this is true, God

¹ "Both Old and New Testament were gifted with a specialized gift to write the very precise Words of God. This gift was specific and different from all other spiritual gifts in that what was written down was the very mouth of God. It is called the theopneustic gift by theologians; theo = God + pneustic = breathed = theopneustic gift (see 2 Tim 3:16). That spiritual gift that allowed a prophet or Apostle to write in such a way that was equal to the very mouth of God." Taken from my series on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

has set in place an umbrella of blessings that *should* direct man towards Himself.² Solomon has distilled into these two verses the real issue to fulfillment in life and stability in both prosperity and difficulty. Let's consider these points:

- Solomon does *not* teach the total futility of life in the here and now. He does teach that whatever good that we have comes from the hand of God.
- While we are to enjoy our leisure time and receive gratification from our work, we should never lose sight of the fact that this is God's plan for our life.
- Fulfillment comes when a man pleases the Lord. The rewards from such a life is wisdom, knowledge and happiness.³ This is the whole purpose of both the good and the bad in our lives - to draw us to him while we are fleeing the emptiness of life.
- Abandonment from this formula results in a meaningless chasing after the wind. This includes the saved who have abandoned a life-style of pleasing the Lord.

The Proper View of God's Goodness in the Lives of Men.

We have to be careful with this point. We should never present the Gospel with a prosperity "angle." Rather, we should present the Gospel as the good news to the sinner who needs redemption from the slave market of sin and regeneration of the heart so that he can be saved. Ecclesiastes produces several arguments proving this point but is careful to include details of His provision for the prosperity, enjoyment and survival of man so that he might be brought into proper relationship with Him.

One interesting detail under the topic of temporal blessings is that God provides for every man a "right" occupation and a "right" woman.⁴ This important blessing will be covered as its own subject. This includes a strong reference to the Sovereignty of God in the affairs of men, **the temporal blessing of man by God is presented, but it is not to be presumed upon as an end unto itself** - thus the point of futility without Christ is made but the ultimate duty of a proper relationship with Him is stressed.⁵ **So a fulfilled life is not to be sought on its own merits** - rather it is one of the rewards that we receive from the Lord because of his nature of generosity and graciousness. God likes to bless men in time. This blessing, however, should not be presumed upon as the "right of man" as though God "owes" man his blessings of a prosperous life. We should not, for example, "blame God" for the ravages of sin in war. War is the result of the wrath of sinful men.

² Read Rom 2:4. God's goodness toward unbelieving man *should* lead him towards repentance and thus a proper relationship with God.

³ Wisdom = skillfulness in doing the right thing. Knowledge = used in reference to knowing the Lord - in this context to be able to discern His will. Happiness = inner wellbeing that expresses itself outwardly - capacity for life that comes from maturity in Him.

⁴ Eccl. 9:9.

⁵ Read Eccl. 12:1, 13, 14. Also, 11:9.

Innocent people suffer because of this. This part of the struggle between good and evil. It is also the way that freedom of our nation is preserved - through a strong military and the willingness to go to war to preserve our freedom. We will soon be introduced to the paradox of prosperity and difficulty which must be a part of every man saved or not.

The Proper View of Tragedies in the Lives of Men.

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him. Eccles. 3:14 Read also verses 1-13.

On the other hand there is a proper view of this seemingly futile life that men should hold. We are anticipating things a bit here but the proper view of tragedies that come into our lives can be found within the pages of God's word particularly in the book of Ecclesiastes. - Again, I am anticipating things a bit but we must view the difficulties we face in life in the context of God's sovereignty in our lives - **difficulties are not a dismal accident of fate rather it is part of God's plan for us that we might seek him in our need and revere him as our Lord and master.**

Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. [9] For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. [10] The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. [11] But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations Psalm 33:8-11

Solomon learned the lesson of God's sovereignty after the fact. He learned about God's sovereignty after he rebelled and rejected God's judgment for his disobedience and gross departure from the Lord in his idolatry. David, his dad, expresses the sovereignty well here in Psalm 33:8-11. No matter how hard Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam God was going to splinter the 10 northern tribes off from Judah and install Jeroboam as their king - period. Plans to murder Jeroboam *had* to come to naught because it was contrary to the plan and sovereignty of God. The good, bad and the ugly are directly under the sovereignty of God. The book of Ecclesiastes and this passage particularly teach that none of our plans that might try to circumvent God's plan for our lives will succeed.

We Can Develop a Complacency in Good Times.

...And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." Luke 12:19

The problem is that fulfillment in life that results from our right relationship with God can easily be a non-issue when everything is going well - good job, health, family, enjoyable hobbies - the lot. We are faced with futility when we are brought up short by some setback or tragedy on our lives - then we are brought face to face with what is called "a reality check." The man in this parable *thought* he had it made. But he didn't count on facing premature death - now all the "good things of life" that he thought he had a right to because he "earned them" meant little in the face of eternal damnation. Where he erred was that he did not acknowledge that all these good things came from the hand of God - that was a fatal error for him.

We need to deal with the ultimate question "what matters in life?" What matters comes from the truth that we find mentioned twice in Ecclesiastes that **we are in God's**

hands and that we should square our lives with eternity's values in view (as goes the chorus). This unfortunate man saw the brute force of Ecclesiastes 2:26, "To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

So the key to understanding this book is to look at Solomon who wrote it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Solomon started out on the right path but departed from it being distracted by the good things of the Lord as an end to themselves and becoming involved with idolatry. He then progressed to outright rebellion and stooped to planning the murder of Jeroboam which was twice a violation of God's sovereignty - murder is forbidden by the law of God and Jeroboam was to be the next king of the 10 northern tribes of Israel - by the promise of the Lord himself. After a while Solomon was restored in right relationship with the Lord and he then realized how empty his life was without the precious relationship he had with God. He was allowed the privilege of writing under the Holy Spirit's direction his inner heart's pondering - for our benefit.

Outline

Let's take a look at a basic outline of the book of Ecclesiastes.

- **The First argument** - Life apart from Christ is futile. However, man is to enjoy the goodness of life because God provides it. 1:1 – 2:26.
- **The Second argument** - Life in general is composed of contradictory circumstances - both good and bad. These contradictions should point man towards God who is sovereign in their lives. 3:1 - 22.
- **The Third argument** - Life can be enjoyed rather than feared when one is in right relationship with God who gives life. 4:1 – 5:20.
- **The Fourth argument** - Divine viewpoint enables one to enjoy and live a fulfilled life including a "right" vocation and a "right" spouse⁶ even though there can be significant reverses. He makes the good and bad to harmonize with the believer who knows and practices Divine Viewpoint.⁷ 6:1 – 12:14.

Final Thoughts about the Emptiness of Life - in Good Time and Bad.

Man is expected to deal with the emptiness of life not by seeking more good "things" or becoming obsessed with a certain lifestyle that might mask this God-given restlessness - rather we are enjoined by Solomon to:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them" -- Eccles. 12:1

The final lesson we can learn, in spite of the emphasis on the youth in this passage, is that it is never too late - we are never too old to find fulfillment in the Lord through an intimate relationship with him. Solomon did.

⁶ Eccl 9:9

⁷ Read Eccl. 713, 14.