

Solomon – Lessons in Living – “All is Vanity”

We saw last week how Solomon fell into sin as a result of his pursuit of pleasure. He persisted in that pursuit for quite some time, until he was an old man. Near the end of his life he wrote a book about the hard lessons he learned in those years, and we know it as “Ecclesiastes”. In that book he’s not dealing with theoretical principles – he’s looking back on the hard-knocks lessons of a life that took the wrong path. He’s writing from the perspective of old age, and the ability to see the results of his choices. He knows the great things that could have been, but were lost, and he knows the false promises of the devil’s lies, and the harsh realities that take their place.

His introduction ensures we know who is speaking: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” There is no one else who could fit that description. We already know that Solomon was famous for his proverbs, his wise sayings, so that fits the preacher title. He was the son of David, and was king in Jerusalem. No other son of David fits that role. What does this preacher have to tell us? Look at v. 2.

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” Basically, he’s saying life is a waste. There’s no point of living – we work and we struggle, but there’s no point to it. We live and then we die. It’s all a hopeless waste. Have you ever felt that way? Or do you know people who feel trapped in this way? It is a depressing, deflating place to be. This was Solomon as an old man – even though he had achieved great wealth, fame, and power. Those things didn’t satisfy him. Let’s hear his own commentary on it.

(2:1-10) “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine – my heart still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.”

Pleasure, drinking, foolishness, building projects, beautiful gardens, slaves, many possessions, abundant wealth, entertainment, fame – he pursued all of these, withholding nothing that he desired. He worked hard at all these things, gaining everything he could from each one. If fulfillment and purpose can be found in any of these, surely Solomon was going to find out. In v. 11 he gives the verdict: “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

I want to point out a phrase he uses here, and several times in the book – “under the sun.” He’s basically saying “in all of creation,” but there is a deeper inference – without God. He’s looking at everything from a strictly human or material perspective, and that’s why the result is emptiness. There is no hope

without God. The book of Job, written hundreds of years before Solomon, says, “Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water? While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.” (8:11-13) God is the source of life, the foundation of our hope.

Notice how Solomon continues in ch. 2:15, “Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil in which I toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?” This is the struggle of existentialism – If this physical life is the sum total of our existence, what purpose is there to all that we do, and all that we are? We live and we die, and for what reason? Whatever we have gained or accomplished is left behind when our life is done.

When Solomon was in that position, both mentally and spiritually, viewing life from an existentialist or human-centered view, he said (v. 24) “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.” Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. That’s the sad existence God has given us, so enjoy what you can while you can, before it’s all done. Sadly, that’s the best that many people can imagine, so they spend their lives buying toys, living for the moment, seeking pleasure, and never giving God much of a second thought.

Paul addressed this model of life in 1 Corinthians, stating in 15:19, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” God never intended for this earthly life to be the sum of our existence. If everything we do, and every reward we seek, is “under the sun,” then we are going to hate life and face hopelessness at the end. God has more for us, and we’ll see next week how Solomon discovered that.