

ECCLESIASTES 1

VANITY OF VANITIES

The Book of Ecclesiastes contains “the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” – obviously none other than King Solomon. And the great intention for which the Holy Spirit seems to have preserved these words for us to read was so that we could learn the emptiness and vanity of all things here below, and satisfy the desires of our immortal souls! Indeed, nothing could have been better chosen to set forth this lesson than the example of the wisest and greatest of all earthly kings. And since the conviction of this doctrine, under the Holy Spirit’s teaching, will be made instrumental to lead the heart to Christ; then here in this Book, we discover yet another gracious means to make us “wise unto salvation through the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” In respect to the time in which Solomon committed these golden sayings to paper, we believe that it was toward the close of his life; for the whole Book seems to be full of practical and experimental conclusions, which a soul taught by grace would make from serious reflections upon human life. Everything void of Jesus is exactly as the Preacher’s constant text expresses it: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

So what is the general theme that the royal preacher desires to convey to us? In order to make us truly religious, he aims to take down our esteem of the things of this world, as well as all our lofty expectations from them. And so he endeavors to show us that these things are all vanity (verse 2). These things are foreign to the soul, and add nothing to it; they do not fulfill man’s chief end, nor do they yield any true satisfaction; they will certainly deceive and disappoint those who put confidence in them. Solomon shows that the things of the world are insufficient to make us truly happy. And for this, he appeals to people’s own consciences: “What profit has a man of all the pains he takes?” The business of this world is toilsome labor “under the sun” (a peculiar phrase that is mentioned 28 times in this Book). But there is a world above the sun – a world which does not need the sun, since the glory of God is its light! In that land, there is work without labor, but also with great profit. But here, “under the sun,” we work to earn our bread with the sweat of our face. And what does it profit us? As to our present condition in the world, it is true that our labor brings us profit. But in short, the wealth and pleasure of this world – no matter how much we have of them – are not sufficient to make us truly happy. A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses (Luke 12:15). Worldly wealth does not satisfy the desires of the soul, nor will it atone for sin. The fruit of our labor in heavenly things is food which endures to eternal life, but the fruit of our labor for the world is only food that perishes.

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The general doctrine of the vanity of created things is laid down – verses 1-3
- ❖ This doctrine is proved by the shortness and fickleness of life – verses 4-11
- ❖ The vanity of man’s knowledge and learning – verses 12-18

Having asserted that all is vanity, and having given some general proofs of it, Solomon gives the record of his own experience. He had tried everything, and found it to be only vanity. If true satisfaction could have been found in anything on earth, he surely would have found it. His high royal station gave him an opportunity of improving himself in all parts of learning – particularly in politics and the conduct of human affairs. His great wealth and honor put him into a position of making his court the center of learning and the rendezvous of educated people, of furnishing himself with the best of books, and of conversing or corresponding with all the wise men of his day. He dedicated his heart to seeking and searching out all things that could possibly be known by deep learning.



Solomon tells us the outcome of his grand experiment, in order to confirm what he had already said – namely, that all is vanity. He found that his searches after knowledge were a weariness to both body and mind. He also discovered that the more he saw of the works that were done under the sun, the more he saw of their vanity; and the sight often caused him to

be troubled. It vexed him to see that many who *did* have wisdom did not use it, and that many who were foolish did not seek to become wise.

Solomon also found that when he had attained knowledge, it did not avail to redress the many grievances of human life, nor to make up the many deficiencies in human comforts. In general, therefore, he concluded that great scholars only make themselves great mourners; for in much wisdom, there is much grief. There must be a great deal of pains taken to get it, and a great deal of care not to forget it; the more we know, the more we see there is yet to be known. And consequently, we perceive with greater clearness that our work is without end; and we see even more of our former mistakes and blunders, which cause much grief. The more we see of people's different thoughts and opinions, the more we are at a loss to know who is actually right. Those who increase knowledge have a greater perception of the calamities of this world; and so for every discovery that they make which is pleasing, they make perhaps ten more that are displeasing – and so they increase sorrow. However, let us not be driven off from the pursuit of useful knowledge; but rather, let us put on patience to break through the sorrows of it. Nevertheless, let us despair of finding true happiness in this knowledge; for we may only expect to find genuine satisfaction in a relationship with the Lord, and in a careful discharge of our duty to Him. The person who increases in heavenly wisdom, and in an experimental acquaintance with the principles, powers, and pleasures of the spiritual and Divine life – such a person increases joy which will shortly be consummated in everlasting happiness!

Lord Jesus, we praise You as the One Who is infinitely greater than Solomon; for Solomon was wise, but You are true Wisdom itself! Amen.