

June 23, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

1. List a few reasons to support your view of who the “Preacher” of this book was.
2. If the preacher was so gifted with wisdom, why did his search with wisdom result in futility?
3. Why is our task in life an unhappy business that God gave?
4. Describe an experience in your life that illustrates how life is like trying to grab a handful of wind.
5. What is the “Crook in the Lot?”

THE MORE YOU KNOW THE WORSE YOU FEEL **Ecclesiastes 1:12-18**

On March 8, 2015 the ISIS and the Levant began the plunder and demolition of Dur-Sharruk, modern day Khorsabad, Iraq. We read about this and heard about it from our American news sources. And probably most Americans reacted with, “So, who cares? Let’s go to the ball game.” That archeological site is one of the more important deposits of antiquities that shed much light on the ancient Middle East. It is especially significant to Jews and Christians because many truths recorded in the Old Testament have been verified by the archaeological discoveries.

One significant find was the Dur-Sharrukin foundation cylinder. This cylinder contains the story of the founding of the city of Dur-Sharrukin. It reveals that construction began in 717 B.C. and would continue for the next ten years. It is like an autobiography of Sargon II, king of Assyria, who was away on campaign during much of this time but kept in touch with his son, the crown prince Sennacherib, regarding the city’s progress. The city is still located in Nineveh and the mention of Sennacherib reminds us of the connection with Judah’s king Hezekiah, and in particular of King Sargon II’s destruction and dispersion of Israel.

On one hand, we who love the Bible are delighted by such archaeological finds as they fill out the story God already gave us in the Bible. On the other hand, such findings as this autobiographical record from King Sargon II sound very much like Solomon’s record of his experiments, forays into construction and development, and searching out wisdom as he tried to find satisfaction in life.

The bad news is that Sargon II died having never found satisfaction. In fact, the record shows that Sargon was killed in battle in 705 B.C., the year after the capital city had been completed. The good news is that Solomon walked down the same path of futility many Middle Eastern kings had traveled, but at the end Solomon turned back to God. Solomon’s autobiography stands in vivid contrast to the testimonies of multitudes of ancient kings because he found satisfaction in God.

Our text is the first segment of a fairly large section (1:12-2:26) in which Solomon recorded his futile search, by human wisdom, for the meaning of life. We too can plum the depths of human wisdom trying to find meaning and purpose. But if we do not resort to God in the search, we too will conclude that the more we know, the worse we feel (1:18).

The Preacher’s Vexation (vv.12-15).

Solomon’s story teaches us that, as far as his research revealed, wisdom doesn’t have the answer (vv.12-13). Again, we are reminded that this is the testimony of the preacher/king. *I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem (v.12).*

Notice from this identifying statement that the preacher was the king over Israel. That could refer to lot of different kings. Some scholars conclude that the king who wrote this book was the wise king Hezekiah. But while it is true that Hezekiah was king in Jerusalem, he was not king over Israel, but only Judah. Only three kings ruled over the combined nation of Israel and Judah, Saul, David, and Solomon. And only two of them reigned from Jerusalem: David and Solomon.

That is enough evidence to help us conclude that the preacher is Solomon. It is important to arrive at that conclusion for various reasons: 1) He was notoriously wise; 2) He was notoriously creative; 3) He was notoriously rich; 4) He was notoriously licentious. All of those characteristics figure significantly in the lifestyle, experiments, searching, and frustration of the preacher. And what did Solomon learn through all his research and curiosity?

The preacher discovered an unhappy business. It wasn't that Solomon was lazy or inaccurate in his conclusions. He applied his heart diligently to a noble goal. *And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven (v.13)*. To seek and search out requires diligent inquiry, careful research. The Hebrew word occurs only eleven times in the Old Testament. Most of those occurrences are in Numbers where the word describes the spies work in Canaan.

Solomon gave himself (*applied*) to this task, as when we are so focused on a task that we become preoccupied. Nor was Solomon simply thinking about these matters, but he poured his whole person, his heart into the project. He used all the wisdom he could gather in order to draw wise conclusions. The book seems to indicate that this searching took many years of Solomon's life.

And through all his diligent, careful observation Solomon learned that God gave us an unhappy business. *It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with (v.13b)*. Trying to explain life's questions, enigmas, confusion is a heavy burden that leads to unhappiness. It is like trying to herd cats. The unhappy business is not God's design but what God allows because of sin and rebellion. The unhappy business, the futility of life's puzzle began in Genesis 3 when sin broke God's perfect creation. As a result of sin, the woman's life is characterized by

frustration with her position. In a similar way, the man's life is frustrated by his never-ending labor over the same plot of life, over and over (the weeds just keep coming up). The job is never over.

Nearly every day it seems at the dinner table, my mother will ask, "Did you get your work done today, Dave?" My reply is always the same. "Nope, the work is never done in this life."

Life's puzzle is an unhappy business because we often don't know the answer (regardless of what the question or dilemma is), and possibly we never will. Can you be satisfied to trust God with the unanswered, confusing, bewildering matters? Being stubborn against God and trying to control circumstances and invent solutions apart from God only makes the burden heavier, the business more unhappy.

Speaking of God, it seems odd that God wasn't at the center of the preacher's research. That is especially puzzling in light of Solomon's connection between the Lord and wisdom. He taught his son: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7)*. He also taught him, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10)*.

Furthermore, we will see throughout this book that in Solomon's big research about life he concluded: *I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him (Ecclesiastes 3:14)*. *For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear (Ecclesiastes 5:7)*. *It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them (Ecclesiastes 7:18)*.

The good news is that the preacher finally ended up in the right place by concluding, *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13)*.

But why does God seem to be absent in so much of Solomon's searching? Maybe the personal pronouns reveal the problem. It is instructive to read how often Solomon referred to himself just in this text (v.12 - *I*; v.13 - *I, my*; v.14 - *I*; v.16 - *I, I, me, my*; v.17 - *I, I*). Goldengay got it right when he wrote, "The occupational hazard of the wise man is to walk by calculation rather than by faith."

(Goldengay, Quoted by Edward M. Curtis, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, 15.)

When we walk by calculation and not faith, we discover that life is a lot like trying to catch wind (vv.14-15). So Solomon decided that all activity on earth is futile. *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind (v.14)*. Surely Solomon did not observe *everything* that is done in the world. Only God is omniscient and omnipresent. But we can observe every “kind” of thing such as science, construction, manufacturing, education, philosophy, psychology, commerce, and such.

Having investigated all manner of human thinking and activity, we conclude that it is all as futile as trying to catch wind. Picture a child watching the dry leaves stirred up by a little whirlwind. He runs to the spot and tries to grab a handful of wind. He caught it, but when he opens his hand nothing is there.

There is an interesting contrast between the ESV and KJV translations of this verse. For example the KJV reads, “. . . behold, all [is] vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecc. 1:14 AV). On the other hand, the ESV reads, “. . . behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecc. 1:14 ESV). What is interesting is that the Hebrew word translated vexation and striving is *reh-ooth'* which means to aim for, long for, strive to achieve. That kind of striving for wind will obviously result in vexation. But longing for or striving after is the better application of the word. Couple with that conclusion the fact that the Hebrew word translated spirit or wind is *roo-ach'* can mean either spirit or wind, both having the same non-physical characteristic. But it is not likely a person will strive for the spirit. Conversely, chasing to catch wind is an accurate picture of life.

And so we expend all the effort, time, and energy allotted to us in life to achieve what people told us to achieve, and in the end what do we have? A pile of useless trinkets? More like a room full of 8 track tape players, VCRs, floppy disks, and cordless land-line phones. After living 80 years and burning out on the treadmill of life, the vast majority of Americans have no more understanding of the real meaning and purpose of life than they had at age four. Running helter-skelter after the passing things of life will not lead us to our Creator, who alone gives meaning to life.

And would we by our efforts change the essential “nothing but wind” characteristic of life? It’s not likely. Solomon concluded that things don’t change much. *What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (v.15)*. Even secular philosophers have said for generations, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” Or as Solomon put it: *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9)*.

It is true that *what is crooked cannot be made straight*. We try to straighten out the crooked only to discover that our much labor only corrected temporarily. Or worse, we redefine “crooked” so that it now sounds straight. But it isn’t. The great labor of the socialists in our nation have not straightened out the crooked. In fact, many times they make things more crooked. How many presidents initiated programs that were intended to eliminate poverty from our society? All of them require working people to pay higher and higher taxes, employers to pay higher and higher minimum wages, and yet we still have massive numbers of people living in poverty in our large cities. The socialists have been creating program after program over the past century to end racial tensions. And yet racial tensions are nearly as strong as they ever were in America. It appears that what is crooked cannot be made straight by our efforts.

Even when we try to change evil people into good people, we generally fail (Jeremiah 13:23, only God can change a leopard’s spots, and that only if He wants to). And we especially can’t make the crooked straight when God makes something crooked on purpose. “*Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?*” (*Ecclesiastes 7:13*). You need to read, *The Crook in the Lot*, by Thomas Boston, (1676-1732), a book he wrote about this verse. The book is a deep read, a slow read, but a most profitable read. As the full title reveals, the book teaches us about the sovereignty and wisdom of God that He displays in the afflictions of men. Boston presented a “just view of afflicting incidents is being altogether necessary to a Christian deportment under them; and that view is to be obtained only by faith, not by sense; for it is the light of the world alone that represents them justly, discovering in them the work of God, and consequently, designs becoming the Divine perfections. When they are perceived by the eye of faith, and duly

considered, we have a just view of afflicting incidents, fitted to quell the turbulent motions of corrupt affections under dismal outward appearances.”

The Greatest Human Wisdom Leads to Futility (vv.16-18).

Again we think the preacher was Solomon because he had surpassing wisdom, superior wisdom (v.16). *I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me” (v.16).* To whom would this phrase more accurately apply than Solomon? God miraculously gave Solomon surpassing wisdom. God offered to give Solomon whatever he asked for (talk about the “magic genie”)(1 Kings 3:5). Solomon asked for understanding to lead God’s people (1 Kings 3:6-9). God showered incredible grace and blessings on Solomon.

Read the account: *And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days” (1 Kings 3:11-13).*

As a result of God’s blessing, Solomon’s wisdom was famous. His “divide the baby” judgment was famous. *And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice (1 Kings 3:28)*

Therefore, the Bible historian recorded that Solomon’s wisdom was surpassing. *And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and*

of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kings 4:29-34). That Solomon confessed to having superior wisdom was not an arrogant conclusion, but an accurate one.

He also had superior experience. *“And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge” (v.16b)* This almost appears to be a second, or renewed, research to find the answers to life. No doubt Solomon honestly had more experiences in wisdom and knowledge than any of his peers. But even renewed questions, renewed research, came to the same futile end: “Apart from God we have no explanation for why we even exist!”

In spite of superior wisdom, the preacher’s wisdom led to greater futility (vv.17-18). He concluded that trying to figure out wisdom and foolishness is futile. *And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind (v.17).* Solomon diligently focused on human wisdom, equivalent to philosophy, to explain meaning and purpose in life.

His conclusion was like so many wise men who came after him. From the foolish philosophers to the wise men like Aristotle and Plato who sometimes came close to the truth of the Creator. To others who focus only on passing things of the universe with no real answers, like Socrates to Steven Hawking and Richard Dawkins. Both of whom almost certainly have some astonishing answers to their questions at the moment.

Solomon even tried to understand madness and folly. These terms refer to lifestyles that wise men would deem intentionally or accidentally harmful and unacceptable. Like having 700 wives and 300 concubines. In chapter two we will study the preacher’s conclusions about chasing after the winds of physical and emotional pleasure.

Finally, Solomon concluded as many of us have, that ignorance is bliss. *For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (v.18).*

In much wisdom is much vexation. The Hebrew word translated vexation is a different word than the one translated vexation in the KJV in verse 14. This Hebrew word means anger, provocation, grief

and frustration. Take the hope and help that comes only from our Creator out of the story of life, and you are likely to experience anger, provocation, grief, and frustration. And also it is easy to view life in this world through the wisdom of God and still become angry and frustrated. That response belies lack of faith in our Blessed Controller.

Also, increased knowledge leads to increased sorrow. As we age, under normal circumstances, we will gain more and more knowledge about life, things, people, and circumstances. It is possible to reach a level of knowledge in these things where we prefer to stop gaining. Or worse, we prefer to go back to ignorance if we could.

When we are children, we know very little about the impact and effects of sin, unless we are living in abusive circumstances, which too many are. Many children grow up with idyllic situations. Growing into our teen years, we learn a good bit about people and personalities and circumstances from our peers. The knowledge continues to increase until in later adulthood it is difficult to trust others, easy to be cynical, tempting to be critical, always wishing we didn't have the knowledge we have gained from experience.

However, God's people have the privilege of talking to God about our frustrations. We are privileged to read God's promises that apply to our difficult circumstances. He can hope in God for eternal life. And sometimes we pray to God, "Even so come quickly, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).