

GOD WITH US
Part 4: The Life and Writings of Solomon
Vision and Vanity – Ecclesiastes

Message 15 – God in the Picture
Ecclesiastes 2:24-5:7

Introduction

In the first 2 chapters of Ecclesiastes, Solomon recounted how he was unable to find meaning and satisfaction in life “under the sun” (i.e., apart from having God and eternity in view). Now, his perspective changes as he brings God into view. We still live in a fallen world, beset by the implications of the curse (Genesis 3:14-24). Ejected from paradise, we will always experience pain in our lives. Yet, God still allows us to find a measure of satisfaction and joy in this earthly existence, even though it is a mere shadow of the glory that is to come. The key is that we must use eyes of faith to keep Him in view in this life. To borrow words from the apostle Paul, we must “*honor Him as God and give thanks,*” otherwise our “*foolish hearts will become darkened*” (Romans 1:21).

Seeing life as a gift from God: 2:24-26

Solomon had tried in vain to find ultimate satisfaction in various pursuits. It was as if he had made these pursuits gods in and of themselves, only to find that none of them (wisdom, pleasure, industry, possessions, sex) could satisfy the deepest longings of his heart. Now, he begins to see that these pursuits are can never substitutes as gods; rather, they are *gifts* from the one true God.

“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person 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” (2:24-26).

The ideas expressed here are repeated like a refrain throughout the rest of the book (see 3:12-14; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9). There IS a way to find *satisfaction* in the midst of this broken world. We must see that our eating, drinking, working, playing, knowledge, happiness, wealth, etc. *is all a gift from the hand of God.* We can

enjoy these gifts IF we receive them with gratitude and contentment, not entitlement.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul warns against false teachers who insist that being “spiritual” is based on *denying oneself the privilege of enjoying God’s gracious gifts*:

“ . . . men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1Timothy 4:4,5).

Seeing God in every season of life: 3:1-8

It is easy to receive and enjoy the gifts of God when they are positive in nature (eg. health, wealth, success, life, good relationships, etc.). Notice how often people say, “Isn’t God good,” when they have experienced something they perceive as good. But the key to living in a fallen world is to see that ***our good God is in the midst of every season of life, whether that season seems like a positive one or a negative one.*** God is still good even when life seems to be not so good.

This very poetic section of Ecclesiastes teaches us that there is an appropriate season for *every* activity, even those that are on the more difficult side of the equation.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

***a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace” (3:1-8).***

These 14 opposites remind us of the wide pendulum swings that come with life in this fallen world. Yet, we are not on a meaningless merry-go-round driven by some merciless fate (as Solomon felt earlier); rather, we are living in a world that IS broken, yet nonetheless overseen by our all-wise, all-loving, all-powerful, all-merciful Father, the Sovereign overseer of heaven and earth. *“Your sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19)*. Absolutely nothing that happens in the universe is outside of God’s influence, permission or authority. Thus, in *every situation in life*, we can trust Him and learn contentment when we choose to believe that He ordains *every season of life*, even the difficult ones.

All of nature displays “seasons.” Circumstances in life also have seasons. When I choose to accept that life is full of seasons, then it helps me to REST in a particularly hard season, reflecting on what I am learning about myself, God, other people, and life. When I am in a “good season” I can remember that even though I hope and pray it will never change or end, the reality is that it will. So, receive the good season as a gift from God. Pay attention to God’s promptings and His unseen ways and choose to responsibly respond in both hard and good seasons. Think about your life – some past seasons and a present season. Write out what was/is going on and what God is leading you to learn or to do. His sovereignty rules over every season.

Eight perspectives that bring life into focus: 3:9-22

The remainder of chapter 3 is a collection of sayings that all involve God and eternity. (“God” is mentioned 11 times in this section.) The context of these sayings is important. Solomon is trying to help us learn how to live wisely in a broken and often painful world. There are certain “above the sun” truths that make life “under the sun” more meaningful and satisfying.

1. Appointments

“God has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11a).

“Everything” means *everything*. The word “beautiful” has also been translated “appropriate” or “right.” This is key to our understanding of the message of Ecclesiastes. Even the things on the negative side of the list in 3:1-8 are “appropriate” because *God has appointed them* for that particular season of our lives. There are no mistakes with God. There are appointed times and seasons *for everything*. Choosing to believe this changes the way we experience the undulations of life on this earth.

2. Eternity

“He has also set eternity in the human heart” (3:11b).

Have you ever said, “I wish this would never end”? We are made in the image of God. He is eternal. We were made to live forever. In fact, we really are “immortal” beings since we *will* live somewhere even after we “die.” Thus, we long for something beyond this life. The heart longs for paradise – that “happily ever after.” We were wired for eternity.

The Christian tradition asserts that God has made Himself known to us through *Creation, Conscience, Christ and Canon*. Thus, our inner awareness of God and eternity is met by a God who graciously steps out of eternity into time and space in order to reveal Himself to us. When our gaze moves beyond our time-bound world to see eternity, this dramatically changes how we live out our lives.

3. Mystery

“... yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (3:11c).

Yet, though God has “*set eternity in our hearts,*” and though He reveals Himself in various ways, there is still much *mystery* this side of heaven. We see Him and perceive His ways through a blurred set of lenses. Even the apostle Paul had to admit the limits of his understanding:

“Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely” (1Corinthians 13:12).

Thus, it requires faith (trust) in God to produce the courage to press on, regardless of the terrain we find ourselves on.

“Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the Lord’s thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice? (Romans 11:33,34).

4. Contentment

“I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and

drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil - this is the gift of God” (3:12,13).

Solomon repeats the refrain that he opened with (2:24-26). The Greek cynical philosophers said: *“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”* While this sounds similar to what Solomon says, there is a distinct difference. The Greek cynics saw eating and drinking as *the only relief* in a life that surely leads to death. Solomon sees eating and drinking as *God’s gift* to humanity. Be happy, do good, enjoy food and drink, live responsibly, learn contentment (satisfaction) in working hard – because every breath, every earthly pleasure, and every opportunity to be fruitful in work is *a gift from God*.

The apostle Paul, writing *from a Roman prison cell*, spoke of how he had learned contentment in any and every circumstance of life:

“I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:11-13).

Are you choosing to learn to be content and satisfied with the work God has provided for you to do? Are you at home with kids? A student? In the workplace? Struggling with a health issue? Are you grumbling and complaining (Philippians 2:14), or choosing to be happy and thankful? Learning contentment is a choice.

5. Permanence

“I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it” (3:14a).

Human life and activity is transient. We are here today, gone tomorrow. Yet, God never changes (Malachi 3:6) and His will and works endure forever. This truth of an enduring, unchanging God gives us comfort and peace in the midst of an ever-changing world full of uncertainty. God’s ultimate plan will be fulfilled. *“Striving after the wind”* (9 times in Ecclesiastes) can be replaced by walking in step with God (Galatians 5:25). As we join ourselves to the eternal, unchanging purposes and plans of God, our lives and our works take on enduring value and meaning.

6. Reverence

“God does it (everything) so that people will fear Him” (3:14b).

Here we find the divine *motive* underlying God’s mysterious ways: He is trying to draw all people to Himself. This helps to explain much of the *pain* that we experience in this world.

“We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” C. S. Lewis – The Problem of Pain

We can confidently assert that God harnesses all pain, all suffering, even all “evil” to this one end: to graciously call all people to come and find their refuge in Him.

To “fear God” is not to be constantly “afraid of Him.” Rather, it means to have reverence and awe for God. He is so beyond our understanding that we should be amazed and in awe of Him. When God allows circumstances in your life that you don’t like, what is your response? Do you blame Him and get angry, choosing to not trust Him any more? Or, do you choose a demeanor of reverence and “fear” that says, “Lord, I don’t understand what You are doing, or what You are trying to teach me right now; but I believe that You are good and I want to follow You through this season. I ask that you show me Your ways, one step at a time.”

7. Responsibility

“God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed” (3:17).

The reality of God and eternity calls us to live responsibly, not carelessly. This theme is repeated in the final lines of the book (see 12:13,14). Instead of throwing up our hands in despair, we must realize that eternity will bring to light the *worth* of all our earthly activities. Even the way we respond to suffering will be evaluated in light of God’s plan and purposes for us.

8. Mortality

“As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other” (3:18,19).

God allows us to constantly be reminded of our mortality. These regular reminders are good for us in that they help us to wisely steward our short time here in this life. This is why Solomon will later say that there is great value in attending funerals!

“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart” (7:2).

Human pride causes us to believe that we are invincible. Throughout life God tests us with reality checks. Can you recall some tests you have had that remind you that your life is fragile, tenuous and not really controllable? Read James 4:13-15. We are warned not to boast about our ability to control tomorrow and determine our own destiny.

Key themes in Ecclesiastes 4-5

[Note: While there seems to be a clear progression of thought in chapters 1-3 (total despair gives way to realistic hope), from chapter 4 onwards, Ecclesiastes reads like a random collection of ideas (much like the book of Proverbs). Commentators agree that it is impossible to detect a clear outline from chapters 4-12. Further, there seems to be variance in Solomon’s perspective. Many sections reflect the tone of pessimism and skepticism we saw in chapters 1 and 2. Other sections lean toward the blend of reality, hope and trust as found in chapter 3. We will not attempt to cover everything in chapters 4-12. We encourage you to read through these chapters at your own pace. Attention will be given to a few major themes.]

The importance of human relationships: 4:9-12

This world is filled with human oppression (4:1-3), rivalry (4:4-6) and isolation (4:7-8). In this context, it is important to find a few good people that we can do the journey with.

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (4:9-12).

The “two” does not specify if it is close friends, partners in

marriage or business, or close community at church, or in a family. The key here is that isolation is deadly. Two is better than one alone. Three is even better. Living life *in community* is vital. (Some have taken “two” to refer to a marriage, and the “third” to be Christ. Indeed, when Christ is the strong cord of a 3-strand rope then that union is hard to break. The goal is to keep Christ and His strength at the center in each person’s heart, and in the center of the relationship.)

Are you in community with at least one other person, or are you living in isolation? Temptations and addictions are strongest when you are isolated. Companionship is key to standing against a difficult world full of challenges and temptations. Is there someone you know who needs to be invited into community? If you feel isolated yourself, take a step toward connecting with safe, God-loving people.

Listening and speaking before God: 5:1-5

Solomon has a lot to say about how we approach God. We should do a lot more *listening to God’s voice* and a lot less *giving voice to our own ideas*.

- On listening to God:

“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (5:1,2).

Why is it important to “*be still and know that I am God*” (Ps.46:10)? A relationship is mutual when both parties speak and listen. How do we “listen to God?” Listening to God requires getting quiet and asking God to reveal something that you need to become aware of. Young Samuel said, “*Speak God, for your servant is listening*” (1Sam.3:10). God speaks in many ways: His Word, something we learn in a Bible study or sermon, a worship song, a recent conversation or conflict, a gnawing conviction of something we have said or done, a passing thought. 1) Get quiet and enter into a receptive attitude of listening. 2) Desire to act on the promptings and thoughts we are having. Ask God to confirm inside yourself or through the counsel of someone else if your desires are good. 3) Follow through. Ask a friend or mentor to hold you accountable to obey God’s promptings.

- On speaking to God (making vows):

“When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, ‘My vow was a mistake.’ Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands” (5:4-7)?

Keeping a vow or a promise is a choice to be faithful to your word. Faithfulness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). As humans, we are easily swayed away from being faithful. God Himself IS our faithful and loving Savior. “The Lord your God, He is the faithful God” (Deut.7:9 – see also 1Cor.1:9; 10:13; 2Thess.3:3; 1John 1:9). Ask God to remind you of vows and promises you have made that you have NOT kept. Be faithful to follow through. Ask God to produce His faithfulness in and through you.