

Ecclesiastes-by Nathan White

Chapter 1

Ecclesiastes has two voices. One voice opens and closes the book, setting the tone and wrapping it up, while the second and main voice says everything in between. The majority of this first chapter is taken up by that first voice. All the talk of “vanity” and “toil under the sun” tends not to fit neatly into categories we expect or enjoy. However, those terms, “vanity” and “under the sun,” are important to understanding Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew word used where we see “vanity” is “hevel.” It has connotations of vapor and nothingness. It doesn’t necessarily mean those things are vain, as we think of vanity, simply that in and of themselves, they are passing away. They don’t satisfy. “Under the sun” is drawing attention to events and things that are, well, under the sun. It refers to what is immediately in front of us. The great, shining hope of Ecclesiastes, however, is that life under the sun is not all there is. Life above the sun, so to speak, broke into life under the sun to redeem us from the vanity that sin brought into the world.

Chapter 2

The end of chapter one leading into chapter two begins the main section of Ecclesiastes in which the Preacher, as he is called, begins examining the emptiness of life under the sun. Remember that he is speaking specifically of these pursuits, not in their proper contexts, but rather in and of themselves. In chapter two, he deals specifically with self-indulgence, wisdom, and toil. Of course, pleasure, wisdom, and work are not inherently bad things. The Preacher, however, is pointing out their emptiness as idols. To pursue any of these things as the highest possible end of our lives is foolish. We will, without exception, find that they do not satisfy. Self-indulgence, pride in our wisdom, and overwork will ultimately leave us with nothing. This will be repeated theme in Ecclesiastes. Only in submission to God, creator of all things, can we enjoy creation as it was meant to be enjoyed, pursue wisdom as it was meant to be pursued, and engage in work the way in which it should be engaged.

Chapter 3

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes opens with what is probably the book’s most famous passage. This short poem points out that there is an appropriate time for all human activities. It addresses the complexity of life under the sun. Despite this complexity and the cyclical nature of all the activities he addresses, the Preacher also recognizes that God makes all things beautiful in their proper time. However, we might not live to see that beauty. We also see that God has put eternity into man’s hearts – we both recognize that there is a larger story than what is in front of us and realize that we might not live to see the full resolution of that story. We only see this present, passing moment. Rather than being angry that some things are out of our finite reach, we should simply enjoy the good things we have while we have them. We could despair that we are finite and will return to dust, but we don’t have to. That despair is countered by our redemption in Christ. In Christ, we can find joy, even in this fleeting life.

Chapter 4

Chapter four opens with the recognition that justice is often unfulfilled “under the sun.” The Preacher is so moved by the plight of the oppressed that he envies the dead. He believes that if this fallen world is all there is, he would have been better off not being born. The hope of Ecclesiastes, though, is that this fallen world is not all there is. He goes on to speak about the evil he has seen arise from toiling out of envy. We can work our lives away for nothing. Even wise work ends in death. He calls for balance in work and rest and doing work in the context of community. The despair of the chapter is countered by the gifts given to us in Christ. In the

church, we have the community we need (vs. 9-12) and that community is called to minister to the oppressed in the name of our Lord who will one day come back to execute perfect justice (vs. 1-3). We also have a day of rest on which we reorient ourselves to the goodness of Christ whose yoke is easy and protect ourselves from the tyranny of finding identity in work (vs. 5-8, 13-16).

Chapter 5 & 6

The fifth and sixth chapters of Ecclesiastes begin by calling the reader to act wisely in vows and in worship. It is better, in fact, to offer nothing than to offer foolish, empty worship and false vows. While previous calls to fear God were predicated on his sovereignty, this one is predicated on his holiness. He is in heaven, we are on earth. He is Creator, we are creatures. The Preacher goes on to warn against the vanity of wealth and honor. This might seem like a strange transition, but there is a clear connection between a desire for wealth and power and a willingness to make false promises in order to get them. However, any who would sacrifice integrity to pursue wealth and power will find that they are worthless pursuits. Seeking meaning in these things will lead to perpetual dissatisfaction until our idols crush us. Rather, as Paul later echoes in Philippians, it is better to be content regardless of our circumstances. Such supernatural contentment, as Paul will so clearly point out, is found only Christ.

Chapter 7

This chapter opens with another short poem in which the Preacher contrasts wisdom and folly. Ultimately, neither one can save us. What might confuse a reader is the warning against being “overly righteous” (vs. 16). Rather than referring to morality, this is addressing the need to always be right. Someone can be overly devoted to proving their point. Such a devotion becomes dangerous because not even the wisest among us is always right. The other danger to avoid is tolerance for wickedness and foolishness. Indifference and rigidity can both destroy us. Humanity’s complexity, that everyone is sometimes right and sometimes wrong, sometimes righteous and sometimes wicked, has led to the Preacher’s inability to truly determine anyone’s deepest motivations. He claims to fully understand no women and success with his own gender is so rare as to be nonexistent. In light of these things, we should approach our relationships humbly. We must hold tightly to what is true while recognizing our fallibility.

Chapter 8 & 9

This section of Ecclesiastes begins with an exhortation to obey the laws of the king. The king is in place under God’s authority. And practically speaking, we avoid a great deal of unnecessary trouble if we follow the law. The Preacher goes on to reiterate that more important than obeying the king is fearing God. However, contrary to what we might expect, fearing God does not automatically lead to a longer or “happier” life. Rather, there are times that it seems the wicked prosper. While God’s reasons for this are unknown to us, the Preacher does trust that it is best for mankind to fear God. The Preacher seems to recognize that God has promised to punish the wicked and His promises are true even when we don’t immediately see the fulfillment. In light of our finite understanding, our unavoidable death, and the temporal nature of all things, the Preacher reminds us that it is best for us to be wise, be righteous, and to enjoy the good things God has given us in the way He meant for them to be enjoyed.

Chapter 10 & 11

Here we see that it takes very little sin and foolishness to upend even a lifetime of righteousness and wisdom. It’s “the fly in the ointment.” One little speck ruins the whole thing. It only takes a little foolishness to ruin our reputations, to steer us drastically off course, or to cause great pain to the people around us. Of course, this is also the case with our standing before God. Just one

little speck of sin is enough to ruin all of our supposed righteousness. Thank God for the gospel of grace that covers our sin and gives us Christ's unstained righteousness! The Preacher goes on to note, however, that even if we avoid "the fly in the ointment" there is simply no way, in our limited reasoning, to ensure that all things play out in ways that we consider to be fair. Some things, no matter the extent of our wisdom, will always be out of our control. In light of this unpredictability, we should simply do the best we can in the moment and enjoy what we have as it is meant to be enjoyed. Live wisely, but don't expect to control everything.

Chapter 12

At the end of Ecclesiastes, we see in clear terms exactly what its purpose is. When all is said and done, the highest good for mankind is to honor God. Everything else we do, if separated from that, is vanity. It is passing away. We find that to fail to love God until late in life is depicted as a clearly regrettable action, a sentiment which Augustine surely understood when he mourned, "Late have I loved you, beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you." As Augustine would clearly attest, it only results in years squandered in senseless pursuits. Ecclesiastes so confidently asserts this that we are even told to be wary of any words or any wisdom except God's very own (vs. 11-12)! Here, at the end of the book, we discover that the central message of Ecclesiastes has been taught to some of us for years in the form of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

-Reflecting on Ecclesiastes-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Ecclesiastes. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Ecclesiastes before we move forward?

"Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation." 1 Peter 2.2