

The Vanity of the World - The book of Ecclesiastes

Meditation:

—A true philosopher is one whose intellect is conversant equally with ascetic practice and contemplative wisdom. Thus the perfect philosopher or lover of wisdom is one whose intellect has attained - alike on the moral, natural and theological levels - love of wisdom or, rather, love of God.

That is to say, he has learnt from God the principles of ascetic practice (moral philosophy), an insight into the spiritual causes of things (natural philosophy), and a precise contemplative understanding of doctrinal principles (theology).^{||} St. Gregory of Sinai

Objective:

- ❖ To know the content and the theme behind the book of Ecclesiastes.
- ❖ To appreciate the wisdom that can be obtained from this book.

References:

- ❖ The Enigma of Ecclesiastes, by Carl Schultz, Ph.D.
- ❖ A metaphrase of the book of Ecclesiastes, by Gregory Thaumaturgus.
- ❖ A commentary on Ecclesiastes, by Bishop Gregory of Nyssa.
- ❖ The new open Bible – New King James

Memory Verses:

—To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; A time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace^{||} (Ecclesiastics 3:1-8).

Introduction:

Outline of the Book of Ecclesiastes:

- 1:1-11 - Introduction and illustration of Vanity
- 1:12- 2:26 - Proof of —All is Vanity^{||} from experience
- 3:1- 6:12 - Proof of —All is Vanity^{||} from observation
- 7:1 – 12:8 - The counsel for living with vanity
- 12:9-14 - Conclusion: —Fear God and Keep His Commandments^{||}.

Lesson Outline:

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom of the Old Testament, which includes the Books of Job and Proverbs. In Hebrew called —Qoheleth^{||}. The English name —The Preacher^{||} is derived from a Greek term —Ekklesiastes^{||}, roughly defined as —one who participates in or address an assembly

Ecclesiastes was a roll that was read at the feast of Booths. The theme of the book is the vanity of mere earthly things contrasted to the knowledge and service of God.

The author of this book tells us that he is —The preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem.¶ This applies to King Solomon where verses (2:4-6) seem to describe him, —I made my works great, I build myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove.¶

The Book consists of 12 chapters containing a series of reflections on the purpose and nature of life, where the prevalent sense of vanity is attributed to the absence of God as a purpose of our life.

Stated at the very beginning of the work, is —all is vanity¶ (1:2). Even if you pursue wisdom and enjoy your wealth, labor faithfully, deplore injustice and wickedness; the end is always the same, —vanity and a striving after wind¶ (4:4).

At the end verse (12:13-14), —the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.¶

The author praises wisdom as being profitable: —Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun¶ (7:11), yet writes of its lack of value (1:18). Of life in general, he supports both extremes by asserting that the dead are happier than the living and the unborn most fortunate of all (4:2-3), but then declares that life is preferable to death: —Anyone who is among the living has hope -- even a live dog is better off than a dead lion¶ (9:4).

One of the explanations of this contradiction is, —teaching by contrast or contradiction.¶ Here the author is trying to tell us that life is worthless without a growing faith in God to give a meaning to it.

Ecclesiastes has been called the most modern book of the Bible. Boredom, surfeit, disillusionment, and world's weariness characterize our times as it did in the time it was written. Older certainties and values have crumbled now as in the life of King Solomon and new purposes to life are sought as then.

It has been also called by Short, —Ecclesiastes is the Bible's night before Christmas.¶ Its purpose seems to be to raise the basic question of life, which only finds answers in Christ. While he correctly observes that there is nothing new under the sun (1:9) we as Christians affirm that through Christ there is newness, —A new commandment I give to you¶ (John 12:37). —If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation¶ (2 Corinthians 5:17). — Behold, I make all things new¶ (Revelation 21:5).

The unsaved or natural man looks at life and says, —Death ends it all, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.¶ This is the way the unsaved man looks at life, and this is the picture that Solomon gives us in the Book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, the entire Book shows us how the unsaved man looks at life —under the sun¶ (Ecclesiastes 1:14), where this phrase —under the sun¶ appears 29 times. He has God remote from his human condition.

It is Ecclesiastes' sharply critical attitude towards human conduct and the instability of earthly existence that has caught the attention of that great Cappadocian bishop, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395), who composed his own commentary on this book. The phrase —vanity of vanities¶ does not condemn creation but simply our misuse of what God had entrusted to our guardianship. As Bishop Gregory says, the outcome of our misuse of the patrimony entrusted to us is the illusion that we are masters of ourselves and of the earth.

When a person begins to grow spiritually, he or she realizes that former ways of life and the world view resulting from them no longer suffice for a new manner of living which has come to birth. That

is, what we once held dear is no longer considered to be so precious. The book of Ecclesiastes clearly provides expression for such a realization. It is concerned more with the fact that everything outside God consists of non-existence. God is absolute virtue, and the evil not belonging to Him consists of non-existence or the deprivation of goodness. It exists insofar as we freely chose to separate ourselves from this good (God). Bishop Gregory employs the vivid expression of —sewing|| ourselves onto God which works against the —rending|| tendency of sin. The bishop of Nyssa in his commentary upon Ecclesiastes' words, —A time to keep silence,|| says that our human intelligence must remain in silent awe and adoration at the mystery of God's transcendence.

The positive teachings of the book include that one should enjoy eating, drinking, and working for these activities are the simple pleasures and bases of human life, and although wisdom could not supply all the answers, the author continued to search for wisdom, where wisdom and fearing God was still the best way to approach life.

Conclusion:

Ecclesiastes is a captivating book, commanding great interest. It speaks to the modern age, as the climate out of which it grew is present with us today, so much that it has been called the most modern book of the bible. The questions, which the book raises, are the very questions we are raising. They are questions about meaning (1:3), monotony (1:10), destiny (3:21), justice (6:8), and the future (8:7).

The author chose to view the world from a natural perspective (—under the sun||), to meet his audience on its own ground – in order to show them the utter futility of a soulless and Godless world.

Modern man is also a man of sight, his conclusion about life being based upon what he can see with his own eyes! But he has become so dependent upon his eyes that he is trapped. He can only perceive that which is seen. Failing to see God and to detect his purposes, modern man becomes weary and even lost, concurring with Ecclesiastes' finding -- *all is vanity*.