

Is Life Nothing But Vanity?

By John R. Gibson

“ *Vanity of vanities,*’ says the Preacher;

‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ ” Ecclesiastes 1:2

Ecclesiastes is a challenging and to many a discouraging book as it calls on us to confront some harsh realities. Think about the following examples of futility found in this book.

No matter what you may do, your time will soon be up and eventually your great accomplishments will be forgotten. 1:3-11

There are things you would like to fix, problems you want to solve, but “what is crooked cannot be made straight...” 1:15

The wisest of men will share the same fate as the fool; i.e. we will all die. 2:14-15

You may succeed in life and leave a good inheritance, but how do you know that for which you worked so hard won’t be squandered? 2:18-19

Life is not always fair and sometimes injustice and oppression prevail. 3:16; 4:1

Instead of being honored, those who “succeed” in life are often envied by their neighbors. 4:4

Society often fails to punish evil and this leads to more and more wickedness. 8:11

There will be times when it appears as though there is no difference in the “successes and failures” of the righteous and the wicked. 9:2

You may be the hardest working, most prepared, most talented, etc. and still not be successful because of “chance.” 9:11

Great deeds are often forgotten. 9:15

One mistake sometimes causes people to forget all the good things we have done. 10:1

Hard work can result in unfortunate accidents and injuries. 10:8-9

And as 12:1-5 describes in a poetic way, our last years can be difficult ones in which we experience few of the pleasures we once enjoyed.

So, what are we to do? Is the Preacher urging a nihilistic outlook that sees life as meaningless? Would we be better off dead than having to live in such a broken world? I fear some Christians have erroneously reached the conclusion that while we can look forward to the reward after judgment (12:14), this life is simply a grievous burden to be grudgingly tolerated. While there will certainly be days of grief and times we must simply trudge ahead, I don’t think that is the message we are intended to take from this book.

Start at the end and realize that in the judgment there will be a reward for fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13-14). Once we have the conviction and assurance that ultimately all will be well, we can begin to see life as God intended. Or to put it another way, those who live the life God intends must be looking with great anticipation to that which lies beyond death. There is no disputing the fact that our lives will have their share of inequities, injustices, trials, sorrows, etc., but when we have learned to look beyond this life for our ultimate satisfaction, then, and then only, are we truly able to enjoy life under the sun. Consider with me a few of the keys to the good life.

More than once the wise man urges the reader to “eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God” (3:12; cf. 2:24; 5:18). We don’t have to know what will happen tomorrow to embrace the gifts God has given today. Will they last? Will we last? We can’t know those answers, but we know we have them now, so let’s enjoy them.

We want health, prosperity, and peace (3 John 1:2; 1 Tim. 2:1-2), but 3:1-11 assures us that God can use every circumstance of life to His purposes. New Testament writers affirm that trials can be beneficial (Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:2-4; et al) and that is the same point the Preacher was making. While we prefer the good times, let’s never lose sight of the One who is able to make everything beautiful in its time as He uses all of life to shape us for the life to come.

Will there be people who fail us? A Judas who betrays us? Certainly there will be some of that, but the life of cynical loneliness is not the one to choose. “Two are better than one” is still the affirmation of wisdom. That some prove themselves unworthy companions is no reason to turn our backs on those who will be there to pick us up, encourage us, etc.

In conjunction with that consider the admonition to “live joyfully with the wife whom you love” (9:9). It is deeply regrettable that some will not keep their marriage vows, but that’s no reason to throw away the closest, most intimate human relationship God created. While marriage is not a requirement, let’s not reject marriage because of those who don’t appreciate the blessedness of it. We are not required to seek marriage (1 Cor. 7:1-9), but as you look around and see far too many failed marriages, don’t close your eyes to the millions finding joy in having become “one flesh” with the one they love.

Death brings pain and sorrow, but as 7:1-4 points out it also has the power to make us reflect. The heart can be made better by sadness as we are made to think more deeply about priorities, the value of friends and family, the necessity of preparing for that moment, etc.

“Why were the former days better than these?” Here in 7:10 we are warned about dwelling on the “good old days” at the expense of being able to enjoy the moment. Often when we are looking back nostalgically, we do so with very selective memories. We remember the good things about the past but filter out a lot of the difficulties and trials they had. And on the flip side we too often see only the negatives of the present day and miss the advantages of our current situation. All of us can look back with longing at some things of the past, but we must accept the fact that change in this life is inevitable and we are moving toward an unchanging, eternal home where we will never have to look back with longing.

“Did you hear what ____ said about you?” One of the highly practical observations in Ecclesiastes is that we should not take to heart everything said about us because we know that we have also said some things about others we regret (7:21-22). When criticisms are valid we can grow from them, but life would be better for all of us if we learned to ignore the petty words of others.

Though chance means hard work sometimes fails to produce the desired result, nevertheless we are urged to put our might into our work (9:10). We may not always succeed if we prepare, work long and hard, etc., but we will almost always fail if we don’t. And even when hard work fails to “pay off,” we can live with no regrets knowing we have done all we could.

Space permitting we could look at other observations, but the point is quite simple—those who are prepared to die are able to live life to its fulness. Like everyone else they will experience disappointments, but they will not be blinded to the blessings of life “under the sun.”

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