

THE VANITY OF WORLDLY PURSUITS

BIBLE TEXT : Ecclesiastes 1:1-18; 2:1-26.

LESSON 376 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God" (Ecclesiastes 2:26).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

- ¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- ² Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity.
- ³ What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
- ⁴ *One* generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.
- ⁵ The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.
- ⁶ The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.
- ⁷ All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.
- ⁸ All things *are* full of labour; man cannot utter *it*: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
- ⁹ The thing that hath been, it *is that* which shall be; and that which is done *is* that which shall be done: and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun.
- ¹⁰ Is there *any* thing whereof it may be said, See, this *is* new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.
- ¹¹ *There is* no remembrance of former *things*; neither shall there be *any* remembrance of *things* that are to come with *those* that shall come after.
- ¹² I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
- ¹³ And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I The Vanity of the Things of This World

1. The Preacher shows there is nothing new in the world. Everything moves in a cycle, Ecclesiastes 1:1-11;
Psalm 62:9
⁹ Surely men of low degree *are* vanity, and men of high degree *are* a lie: to be laid in the balance, they *are* altogether *lighter* than vanity.
Romans 8:20
²⁰ For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected *the same* in hope,
2. He applied his heart to search out by wisdom the things that are done; he found this also to be vexation of spirit, Ecclesiastes 1:12-18;
Ecclesiastes 7:23-25
²³ All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it *was* far from me.
²⁴ That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?
²⁵ I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of *things*, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness *and* madness:
1 Thessalonians 5:21
²¹ Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.
3. He tried mirth and wine, houses and vineyards, silver and gold, musicians and singers, but all proved to be vanity in respect to the chief good, Ecclesiastes 2:1-11;
Luke 12:19
¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, *and* be merry.
4. Then he looked at wisdom and folly, and saw that wisdom excelleth folly as light excelleth darkness, but that one event happeneth to all, Ecclesiastes 2:12-17;
Ecclesiastes 8:1
¹ Who *is* as the wise *man*? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.
Psalm 49:10
¹⁰ For he seeth *that* wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others.
Proverbs 17:24
²⁴ Wisdom *is* before him that hath understanding; but the eyes of a fool *are* in the ends of the earth.
5. He perceived by experience that real pleasure or good cometh not with one's own striving, but from the hand of God, Ecclesiastes 2:18-26;
Job 27:16-17
¹⁶ Though he heap up silver as the dust, and prepare raiment as the clay;
¹⁷ He may prepare *it*, but the just shall put *it* on, and the innocent shall divide the silver.
Proverbs 28:8
⁸ He that by usury and unjust gain increaseth his substance, he shall gather it for him that will pity the poor.

NOTES:

things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

¹⁵ *That which is* crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

¹⁶ I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all *they* that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

¹⁷ And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom *is* much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

¹ I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also *is* vanity.

² I said of laughter, *It is* mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?

³ I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what *was* that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

⁴ I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:

⁵ I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all *kind of* fruits:

⁶ I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:

⁷ I got *me* servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:

⁸ I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me

Solomon's Pursuits of This Life

The scope of Ecclesiastes is to show the vanity of all mere human pursuits in contrast with the blessedness that comes from God in wisdom or true religion. He shows the vanity of all human things to satisfy the soul, and that heavenly wisdom alone is the chief good.

It is said that the Song of Solomon was written in Solomon's youth when the love of God animated his heart and life. He spiritualised the subject in an allegory. It is thought the Book of Proverbs was written in his mature manhood and Ecclesiastes was the sentiment of his old age.

The Jews read Ecclesiastes annually at the feast of Tabernacles -- a most mournful Book at a most joyful feast.

When Solomon was young and was made king over Israel, his heart longed for God. He wanted peace, he wanted righteousness, he wanted wisdom to know how to judge so great a people. God gave him the desire of his heart and added riches and fame and honour. He had the most glorious reign of any earthly king. People came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

He tried everything in life to find what life really held in store for the happiness of man. He observed that everything went in cycles. One generation passed away and another came. The sun arose and then went down and hastened again to the place where it arose. The wind whirled about continually, going from north to south and then continued again in its circuit. All the rivers ran into the sea, then to the place from whence they came they returned. There was nothing new under the sun. What existed now had always been.

He gave his heart to search out wisdom and folly. He saw all the works that are done under the sun and observed that that which was crooked could not be made straight, and that that which was wanting could not be numbered.

Mirth a Failure

Solomon next tried pleasure and wine to see what happiness he could find in mirth. He said of laughter, "It is mad," and of mirth, that there is nothing solid to it. He tried the banqueting halls of wine and found that wine is a mocker and strong drink is raging; and he wrote, "Look not thou upon the wine when it is red . . . in the cup." Paul says, "His servants are to whom ye obey" (Romans 6:16). How many people have become slaves of strong drink! Solomon found it all vanity.

No Comfort in Homes and Parks

Solomon next built stately houses and planted vineyards and made gardens and pools, the things that would gratify the artistic eye and taste. He was 13 years in building his own house. All that money and decorative art and skill could produce was lavished on that building. He made beautiful parks and planted trees and made pools of water to irrigate them. Some of the pools remain to this day. He had scenic pleasure grounds with flowers and shrubs near his own estate. He loved the beautiful. He possibly had everything as near a paradise as man could make here on this earth. But fine homes, beautiful parks, everything that money and skill could accomplish were still vanity and vexation of spirit.

Music and Literature

He tried music and literary art, a talent inherited, no doubt, from his father, David. We are told that he wrote a thousand and five songs and spoke three thousand proverbs. He wrote about trees, from the beautiful cedars of Lebanon to the little hyssop plant growing out of the wall. He wrote about beasts of the field and fowls of the air and fishes of the sea. His fame spread

men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, *as* musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

⁹ So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.

¹⁰ And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.

¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all *was* vanity and vexation of spirit, and *there was* no profit under the sun.

¹² And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what *can* the man *do* that cometh after the king? *even* that which hath been already done.

¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

¹⁴ The wise man's eyes *are* in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

¹⁵ Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also *is* vanity.

¹⁶ For *there is* no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now *is* in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise *man*? *as* the fool.

¹⁷ Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun *is* grievous unto me: for all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

¹⁸ Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.

¹⁹ And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise *man* or a fool? yet

abroad in all the land. Kings of the earth came to hear his wisdom.

Fine Horses and Chariots

He had the finest of horses and chariots: forty thousand stalls for his horses, and twelve thousand horsemen. He had great possession of cattle, more than all that were in Jerusalem. He launched the first navy that the kingdom of Israel had. He carried on commerce with the nations around.

He compared wisdom with folly, and found it exceeded folly as light exceeded darkness; yet one event, death, happened to them all.

A True Report

"So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom. And all the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart" (I Kings 10:23, 24).

When the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon and propounded her hard questions, and saw his wisdom, the house he had built, and the meat of his table, and the attendance of his ministers, there was no more spirit left in her. She said, "It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom."

Satisfaction from the Hand of God

Solomon tried everything in the world to its fullest extent — fame, honour, prestige, wealth, fine homes, chariots and horses, the love of women, music, singing, writing books, composing hymns. Not a stone was left unturned to find something to satisfy the heart in this life. Whatever his eyes desired, he kept not from them. He sought everything that he might find out what was good, and real pleasure for the sons of men here on earth. But God has kept a space in the human heart that He alone can fill. Unless God fills that space with Himself and His love, there is a vacuum no earthly thing can fill. Experience taught Solomon that satisfaction and real joy comes only from the hand of God.

Paul, the Apostle

Let us contrast the quests of Solomon with those of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. He, too, started out to reach the hall of fame. He was educated at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the greatest teachers of his day. He was fast climbing the ladder to the top. But Jesus of Nazareth arrested his footsteps one day. His ambitions were changed. He suffered many hardships, but he found in Jesus all he needed: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Nothing could separate him from the love of God. At the closed of his life he wrote, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness" (II Timothy 4:7, 8). He had a triumphant end. His name stands out in Christendom as one of the greatest of men, while Solomon, with all his wisdom and wealth, suffered defeat.

Peace Through Jesus

Solomon realised in his closing days that peace and victory came only through the hand of God; that the pursuits of happiness in this life through worldly channels were only vanity and vexation of spirit.

If Solomon then, with all his opportunities of enjoyment, failed utterly to find happiness apart from God, who could? Happiness here is truly the portion of the godly. Peter says, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (I Peter 1:8).

At the close of his search, Solomon said, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes

shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This *is* also vanity.

²⁰ Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.

²¹ For there is a man whose labour *is* in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it *for* his portion. This also *is* vanity and a great evil.

²² For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?

²³ For all his days *are* sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

²⁴ *There is* nothing better for a man, *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it *was* from the hand of God.

²⁵ For who can eat, or who else can hasten *hereunto*, more than I?

²⁶ For *God* giveth to a man that *is* good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to *him that is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

12:13).

Jesus said: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Paul said, "But godliness with contentment is great gain" (I Timothy 6:6).

QUESTIONS

1. How many books in the Bible were written by Solomon?
2. When Solomon was made king, what did he ask of the Lord?
3. What did Solomon say of the sun, the wind and the rivers?
4. What was Solomon trying to find in life?
5. Where did he find was the source of true happiness?
6. Compare his life with Paul's.
7. What did Jesus say about gaining the whole world?