

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 1**

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With the book of Ecclesiastes, we tread on some holy, complex and dangerous ground. The whole thing is, for most, a mysterious conundrum stuck right there in the middle of your Bible, and most preachers avoid it like the plague. Yet, avoid it as we might try, the book has seeped into our culture and our consciousness, but only as a series of dismembered sayings with virtually no attention paid to the overall argument and coherence of the book. Think of how much of this book – even in avoiding it – you have heard:

Vanity of vanity all is vanity, there is nothing new under the sun, with much wisdom comes much grief, there is a time for everything and a season for every purpose under heaven, man's fate is the same as the animals, a cord of three strands is not easily broken, cast your bread upon the waters, remember your creator in the days of your youth, of the making of many books there is no end.

All fragments of the mysterious whole that is Ecclesiastes. The book has been called cynical, jaded, contradictory, jumbled, despairing, atheistic, and hedonistic; and those are just a few of the derogatory labels that have been hurled at the book.

After all this is a book which tells us: everything is vanity, all of life is like shepherding the wind, work has no profit, nothing is really new, labor is hateful because the fruits go to others, church and state are corrupt, men are oppressed, its better to have never been born in many cases, riches destroy their owners, the good and evil both die, time and chance overtake us all, and many other cheerful ditties.

Ecclesiastes is, even on faithful and sympathetic reading, a brutal book. It looks at life with a shocking candor that most of us are simply either unwilling or unable psychologically to tolerate. But the author does not allow us to avert our gaze. He relentlessly grabs us by the scruff of the neck and shoves our noses back into the intractable evil, the incalculable woe and misery that is life under the sun, saying: "No, you cannot, you **MUST** not turn away: look at this again, look harder and longer. I know it hurts, but, trust me, it will be good for you."

I have become convinced that it is **NOT** in spite of this ruthless, almost violent honesty, but **BECAUSE** of it, that Ecclesiastes is such a relevant, even

indispensible book, for our time. Ecclesiastes opens a wound, probes it, and refuses to heal it lightly. But, and this is crucial, it DOES, enigmatically, heal it. But you simply cannot get to the cure without a full and painful diagnosis of the disease. For now you will have to trust me that this is a book of JOY, even of feasting. This is a grimness that leads to gladness, an apparent meaninglessness which becomes the mother of all meaning.

Today, by way of introduction, I want to cover six points which provide us with the frame in which to see and, hopefully, make sense of the book. The six points are: The Preacher, Solomon, Vanity, Under the Sun, Gain, and Joy.

## **I. First, the Preacher.**

Qoheleth is the Hebrew word for Preacher in verse one. And Qoheleth is the Hebrew name for the book. The word was translated in the Greek OT as Ecclesiastes. It is apparently a title or an office having to do with the OT church, or the gathered assembly.

So, the word means the one who calls the assembly, the one who gathers it for teaching and instruction. Thus, the loose translation which you see in your English Bible: the Preacher. Qoheleth, or the Preacher, is the one who tells the story and takes us on his painful journey. Here we must carefully note that the Preacher is spoken of in the third person in a couple of key places. He does not introduce himself until chapter 1, verse 12.

There we read: I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. This means that verses 1 through 11, which are in the third person, note v.1 “the words of the preacher”, in all likelihood, were added as a preface by a later editor who is giving us the Preacher’s story.

This editor’s third person voice appears again in chapter 7 and, very importantly, at the end of the book in chapter 12, verses 9-10 (turn there) where he says: Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

Here, in the epilogue, the Preacher is referred to three times in the third person. So, the book owes its final shape to this editor who is framing and narrating the Preacher’s journey. In that sense, Solomon is NOT the final author of the book. Intriguingly, Solomon is never named in the book, it is this enigmatic figure known as Qoheleth, or the Preacher, who tells the tale. This bring me to point two, Solomon.

## **II. Solomon**

The traditional view is that Solomon is the author of the book. Now, we must qualify that by what I just said about the editor. Once we've done that the question is: is the Preacher Solomon?

I cannot go into all the complex scholarly arguments here, but let me summarize: Until the Reformation, Solomon was considered to be the Preacher. At the Reformation this consensus began to break up. Luther was the first to deny that Solomon was the author Preacher and today that is the consensus. Even most, not all, but most, conservative scholars hold that Solomon is not the Preacher. (E.J. Young)

Now the reasons for this are NOT obvious at first since the Preacher is identified in v.1 as the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and much of the early chapters clearly refer to events in Solomon's life. Nevertheless, there are reasons. But, as I said, I won't go into why here; you can see me afterward if you'd like to discuss it, but the bottom line is this: either Solomon is the Preacher –which is possible (a case CAN be made for it) - or the narrator is using Preacher as a Solomon like figure and giving us a Solomonic quest for wisdom. Nothing much is at stake here, and for the sake of simplicity I will refer to the Preacher and Solomon interchangeably.

In any event the book is divinely inspired, kingly, wisdom for the people of God. What we have here, as the end of the book makes clear, is Solomon, or the Preacher, looking back in old age, and giving us a distillation of his wisdom. This is not a piece of skepticism, and it is not written, primarily at least, for unbelievers. It is kingly wisdom from the living God. As the narrator puts it in chapter 12: The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings, they are given by one Shepherd. The Preacher is the shepherd king of Israel and he convenes the assembly to instruct us in clear-eyed, sober, wisdom from the Divine Shepherd-King.

### **III. Our third point is Vanity.**

Hebel is the Hebrew word translated vanity throughout the book. Hebel is crucial because it is used 38 times in the book. This word is sometimes translated as meaningless, but that is NOT the meaning. Solomon does not hold that everything is meaningless. While the word has a range of meaning, and we will have to look at it carefully in each context, perhaps the best root meaning is vapor. Everything is transient, vanishing vapor.

Solomon's use of this word is best seen by a phrase he uses it in conjunction with, namely, shepherding the wind. Everything under the sun is ungraspable, elusive, enigmatic, out of our control, unmanageable – its vapor, a mist, a puff of smoke. We can't gain the leverage or the control we want over the world, which

is why Ecclesiastes is the bane of our control freak culture. Everything is vapor and we insist on shepherding or grasping the wind.

Not only is everything vapor, but as verse two says twice, its vapor of vapors. It's superlatively vaporous. This form is a parody of the phrase "holy of holies" – the supremely holy place. Life under the sun is supremely vaporous. The preacher is relentless and unyielding: ALL is vapor.

Here I must disabuse you of what is a very, very popular interpretation of this phrase, and I'm sure you've heard it. It is said that Solomon is speaking throughout the book from the perspective of life without God. Thus, the point, we are told, is that apart from God, life is meaningless. Let me put it as bluntly as possible. This is wrong. It is an example of healing the wound that Solomon wants opened too lightly.

Let me explain. First, the word Hebel does NOT mean meaninglessness. It means unmanageable or vaporous. So the point is NOT that life is meaningless apart from God.

Second, this book, as we have seen, is divinely given, kingly wisdom for the people of God – it is not primarily a work of apologetics for unbelievers.

Third, in the midst of his catalogue of vapors, what we might rightly call Solomon or the Preacher's descent into despair, he says in 1:13 that he sought by WISDOM to search out all that is done under heaven. He says in that same verse, by that same wisdom, that the unhappy business which we are to be about is something that GOD HAS GIVEN the children of men to be busy with. He adds in 1:16 that he speaks out of this divine gift of wisdom. Even in his pursuit of pleasure Solomon says in 2:9 that "my wisdom remained with me."

Fourth, and perhaps the most decisive consideration here, is that all that Solomon describes as vapor REMAINS vapor even for Christians. We die like the animals, we see and experience the injustice and oppression Solomon catalogues, we find that nature is impervious to our needs, that life is unmanageable, that the future is uncertain. So Hebel, the vapor, the fleeting mist, is NOT life from an unbelieving point of view. It's life, period.

Fifth, at the end of the book in chapter 12, verse 8, after all is said and done, after speaking of God's gifts in the midst of this vaporizing life, the Preacher says again: vanity of vanity, all is vanity. So if he's speaking as an unbeliever he must be doing so all the way to the middle of the last chapter. This, as we shall see, simply won't work.

Sixth, just for good measure, in the NT James says that your life is a vapor. Paul says that the whole creation groans because it is subject to futility, to vanity, and

Paul the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Hebel. So the vaporizing, vanity of life remains for, and applies to, believers.

This means, among other things, that true wisdom is COMPLEX. You need the relatively straightforward, precept by precept wisdom of proverbs AND the complex and often exasperating wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

#### **IV. Our fourth point is “under the sun.”**

All of this vapor takes place “under the sun” at the end of v.3. This phrase is used 29 times in the book and, in light of what we’ve just said; it does not mean life from the perspective of unbelief. It means from the perspective of man to be sure, man in the totality of his experience, it speaks of the world in its own rights, the fallen world we experience, but it does not refer to man or the world without God. The business that takes place under the sun is the business GOD HAS GIVEN MAN, and it is explored by Solomon with God-given wisdom.

#### **V. Our fifth point is GAIN.**

Here I refer to the word in the first half of v.3 “what does man GAIN by all the toil at which he toils under the sun.” This word for GAIN is a term from the business world and it’s used 10 times and it means profit or advantage or what is left over. This is a book deeply concerned with man’s labor – labor and work related words are used 35 times. The whole book is driven by the question in v.3: what does man gain by all his toil under the sun. We can paraphrase it this way: what leverage does man have? What advantage is there to his labor? What can he really control? He is brought into and out of life by forces completely out of his control.

The vast majority of what he’d like to know is hidden from him. The cosmos whirls on apparently indifferent to his very existence. His labor is constantly lost, squandered, and handed on to others, and who knows what they will do with it? In the end what does he really gain? This is the Preacher's great question.

#### **VI. Finally, point six is Joy.**

Here I want to tell you where we are going because, while I don’t want you to short-circuit Solomon’s grim journey, I don’t want you to slit your wrists either. I would like you to come back next week. Solomon is demolishing to build. His apparent despair leads to true hope. This IS a book about JOY. He uses the word for joy or rejoicing 17 times. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of costly grace as opposed to cheap grace. Ecclesiastes is about costly joy as opposed to cheap joy.

There are a lot of happy Christians who simply cannot stomach Solomon's journey. They are practiced at averting their eyes. They mistake the vapor for something solid. They are convinced that, at least as far as their lives are concerned, they are shepherding the wind pretty well. You should not mistake their cheerfulness for joy. The only joy Solomon knows is that which comes out, battered and bruised, on the other side of his journey. And that is the only joy worth having. And once we get there it's a feast. It's about wine, women and song. At crucial points in the book Solomon summarizes his conclusions. One such point is 2:24-25:

There is NOTHING BETTER for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? He makes the much same point 4 other times. He repeatedly advocates joyful feasting AND labor, all received by faith as the gift of God. Here he anticipates the joy of the kingdom which Jesus and all His feasting brought.

So let me give you the cliff notes version of the whole book. Life is a vapor. You can't control it or manage in any serious respect. It is enigmatic and fleeting and brutal and unfair. It is an endless parade of vanity. It's crooked and you are not going to straighten it.

But those who fear God can nonetheless – in the teeth of this unvarnished reality – have joy. They can enjoy the goods of marriage, and food and drink, and labor because they receive them by faith from the hand of God. Life is like a very short and steep ride at a water-park which descends into the abyss of death. It's like a parade of fools walking into a firing squad. You can't get off the water slide and you don't get to opt out of the parade.

So, what's Solomon's advice? Something like: Soberly realize what you're up against, grab a hot dog, have some chips and dip, and enjoy the ride.

Now, a couple important caveats. We need to realize that this perspective on wisdom is not the only perspective in the Old Testament. It is clearly radically different than Proverbs, for example, which lacks the kind of pessimism found here. Yet, this perspective is true, and vital, if we are to grow in real world wisdom.

Also, we must remember that now, in the New Covenant in Christ, we know more than the Preacher, and can affirm things he cannot affirm. This is an important word, but it is neither the first nor the last word in Scripture.

Now, let us turn to the text. After v.1 where we are told we are receiving kingly Solomonic wisdom for the people of God, v.2 comes as pure shock:

Vanity of Vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. We will use vapor, not meaningless, as the main idea for the word translated vanity. The root idea is that life is vaporous, unmanageable; it is unable to be controlled or leveraged. It is enigmatic and mysterious. It's unreliable, frail and fleeting. And the preacher is emphatic: ALL is vapor. Not that the universe is ultimately meaningless, but, from the perspective the Preacher adopts, it surely does not hold the key to its own meaning. More specifically, the claim here is that the whole human spectacle, ALL that occurs under the sun – ALL of it – is vapor. Here, at the outset, we are tempted to think the Preacher is overreaching.

Surely he is exaggerating. But we should be clear about this from the outset – he does not think so, and we need to hear him out. His driving question for the whole book is in v.3: what does man GAIN by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What profit, what residue, does man really have with respect to his labor? This is the great question the Preacher is asking. And his answer is going to be, initially at least, not much.

Verse 4 is where he begins to make his case. A generation comes, and a generation goes, but the earth endures forever. The point here is that humankind is transient and vaporous, while the earth abides forever. Our lives are a breath, a vapor, a watch in the night as Psalm 90 puts it; they are like withering grass as Isaiah puts it and, at this point, the Preacher IS in full accord with the rest of the OT.

In the fourth century, the great biblical translator Jerome said: what could be more vain than that man, for whom the earth was made, keeps returning to the earth, while the earth itself endures. The trees on your lawn will be around a lot longer than you will.

The generations come, brought into life without their consent, and they go, leaving the stage under forces that are beyond their control. It's the waterpark slide analogy. You don't know how you got on the slide, but you are on it, and you will only be on it for a vaporizing moment. Sure, there are folks on it behind you, the next generation, but they are in the same predicament.

For the Preacher there is a deep and dark irony in this perspective which we often blithely ignore. The whole spectacle, this battered, blue-green ball, hanging in black space has become one global burial plot, a cosmic cemetery. Here the Preacher takes the stance of an outsider, almost like a Martian, gazing at the spectacle. He wants to know what GAIN, what profit or leverage, man has on this waterslide.

A generation comes and they are quickly plowed back into the earth. Another one is right behind them and they have the same fate. Sure, they leave some nice toys behind – they pass their hot dogs to those behind them on the waterslide as they reach the bottom - but what gain is there in this? Sure we

invent stuff, be neither we, nor those who come after us, can enjoy it for long. The ride is steep and short. Only the earth, saturated with our bones, remains.

Now, we can begin to see that the Preacher is not going to back off his contention: all is enigmatic and uncontrollable vapor. He continues in v.5: the sun rises (Hemingway), and the sun goes down, and hastens or pants to the place where it rises. Here the vapor, the vanity consists in sheer unremitting REPITITION. Over and over and over and over, and you are not consulted, you have NO leverage over the giant, cosmic forces which engulf you. The sun rises, you get up and go about your labor, the sun sets, and you go to bed. Then what? Well, you do it all over again, what choice do you have?

You get up and stare at the sun, the same sun Noah saw, and Abraham and Mohammed and George Washington and your great grandfather saw. And what did the process do to them? It ground them to dust and bones. That's what the sun does as it pants back into place only to start all over. That's a lethal, murderous sun up there. We may expect to see it every morning, but guess what? It DOESN'T expect to see us. Not for long anyway.

A few years ago a singer-songwriter named Warren Zevon was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He lived just long enough to record one final album, a deeply moving meditation on his upcoming demise, entitled simply "The Wind." My favorite song on the album is one where Zevon sings to the one he's leaving behind: when you get up in the morning and you see that crazy sun, keep me in your heart for awhile, there's a train leaving nightly called when all is said and done, keep me in your heart for awhile.

There's a train leaving nightly called when all is said and done. And that crazy sun up there is the conductor on the train. We spin and spin, the sun goes up and down, and that inscrutable thing called time, as the hymn puts it, time like a rolling stream bears ALL its sons away. They die forgotten as a dream dies at the opening of day. Tonight, tens of thousands of humans are scheduled to get on that train called when all is said and done. And the sun will cry no tears at their absence in the morning.

He's dealt with the generations, the earth and the sun. In v. 6 he turns to the wind. The sun has an east-west pattern, so he focuses on north and south, maybe we can find solace there. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north, around and around goes the wind, and on it circuits the wind returns.

Here again, we find inscrutable, uncontrollable, repetition. What GAIN or leverage do you have over the jet stream? It makes your flight longer in one direction and shorter in the other, but you are not consulted. The seasons, the weather, the tornadic activity, none of the forces that make and break things, consult us. That is why the vanity, the vapor in Ecclesiastes, is likened to shepherding the wind. Life is ungraspable and elusive in its most basic elements.



The preacher closes his survey of creation in v.7. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full, to the place where the seas flow they will flow again. Same enigmatic repetition. The water just keeps moving around in a circle. There's no new water added to the system. The same rain that fell on Paul and JFK falls on you. As Bob Dylan, in his own musical version of Ecclesiastes, put it: I've been to London and I've been to gay Paree, I followed the river and I got to the sea, sometimes the burden is more than I can bear, it's not dark yet, but it's getting there.

Wisdom is knowing that the sandcastles of our lives will soon be swept out to sea. Verse 8 gives us the summary of the Preacher's journey so far: all things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it. The world itself seems tired to the Preacher. The sheer repetition is exhausting. A man cannot utter it means - no man can tell what this repetition means. Creation doesn't wear its heart on its sleeve. You can't stare at it and unravel its grand design. The whole scene is emotionally and psychologically taxing. The eye is not satisfied with seeing and the ear is not filled with hearing. We stare at all this stuff and it doesn't satisfy, the ear cannot grasp the significance of all it hears.

The preacher is now finished with his tour of earth, sun, wind and seas. You'd think he needs a break, maybe an ice-cream cone or something, but he's just getting started.

Here let's deal with an objection. What about God's mercies being new every morning? What about the heavens declaring the glory of God? What about all the celebrations of, and delight in, creation in the Psalms and prophets? What about God's kind providences?

This is what tempts so many, wrongly I assert, to say the preacher is speaking from an unbelieving perspective. Let me say this: all the good stuff about creation and providence in the OT is, of course, true. But, and this is crucial, the perspective here is ALSO true. There is not one thing I said about the generations, the earth, the sun, and the wind which is not true – and true for Christians.

Remember, Solomon's question is what GAIN or leverage we really have in light of our impotence before all these forces. Do you think no Christians were killed in the earthquake in Haiti? Do you think the water from the great Tsunami in 2004 stopped to ask about one's faith before drowning its victims? What leverage or control did they have over their lives? They probably thought quite a bit until it became clear that they had none. Beloved, don't be naïve. Wisdom has to deal with this viewpoint as well. That is part of the pain and the glory of Ecclesiastes. It forces you to integrate more stuff into your worldview.

So, having dealt with creation's inscrutable repetition, he now moves to history in v.9. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Same repetition here in history that we saw in the cycles of nature. History repeats itself. The nature of man doesn't change, the vaporous quality of life doesn't change, the earth and sun and wind and sea don't say "oh, look, the enlightenment is here, let's make the appropriate adjustments."

It is in this context that we must understand the question in v.10: Is there a thing of which it is said. "See, this is new?" We live in an age with a lust for what's new. What's next, what's now. Who's in and who's out. We forget the waterslide. The stuff we think of as new is really epiphenomena to the Preacher – stuff floating on the surface, the cooler left on the beach after we are drawn out to sea.

Solomon is not saying that human's don't invent things, that they don't advance technology. He will list a bunch of his own, very successful projects in the next chapter. He wants to know what GAIN, what real leverage you have. You say, "hey, Solomon, look this is iPad, and we have this really cool thing called the internet." He's says: sure, it's a faster way to get reams of information, most of it useless. Does it make you wise? Does it stop the sun from rising or the generations from coming and going? Does it change the course of rivers? Does it get you off the waterslide? Does it remove the firing squad at the end of the block?

At the end v.10 he says: It has been already in the ages before us. This is true of much that we think is new. If we knew history we'd realize that we are constantly engaging the same questions, the same obstacles, the same limitations, that many of our forefathers engaged. There are very few original thoughts floating around out there. Technology is not new. It's as old as man. Certain gadgets are new, but the underlying human and ethical issues, the limitations in the light of the vapor, they remain. So, the Preacher is not so naïve to think that the iPad is not new in some sense. He's after a more profound insight into history summarized in the old saying: the more things change, the more they remain the same.

And, finally, in v.11, he will tell you what he thinks of all our fleeting, ephemeral newness. It doesn't amount to much in light of the fact that mankind has a short memory. There is no remembrance of the former things. "Things" here encompasses both things and people.

Let's take things first. So, the stuff your great grandfather did at work for 40 years, does anybody remember it? Who remembers all the fads and gizmos and gadgets from the 11<sup>th</sup> century? Some ancient Sumerian is walking under the same hot sun as you 5000 years ago talking to his wife about their finances, and the latest crops, and the condition of his mule and the new marketplace that just opened up on the Euphrates. Who remembers all the stuff that filled his world?

I have a friend who worked 31 years at IBM. He kept notebooks from the day he hired on in 1978 until he retired in 2009. We sat down and looked at a few of the early ones one day. They are laughable. The hottest, most crucial technologies are forgotten and irrelevant in no time. The whole collection of notebooks is a monument to the fleeting nature of things. So, sure Solomon may be a little hyperbolic here, but not much. There is no remembrance of the former things. The internet will add itself to the junk pile of long forgotten technologies as well.

What about people? Here I can do no better than to cite the great catholic writer Thomas Howard: An obscurity muffles almost every human being ever born into this world. Very few rise above the facelessness of the multitude. Few break through the hedge that hems in the conditions into which they were born.

Conquerors, explorers, poets, tsars, notables and potentates of all sorts add up to a very slender list indeed when we compare that list with the immeasurable roster of us mortals. Who can even so much as conjure a picture of the hordes and hordes and hordes that struggle briefly across the dim rear of the stage only to disappear forever? King Tut is haled up from his repose under his pyramid, and his name is restored to the lips of a century infinitely remote from his: But what of his ten thousand slaves? Where are their tombs? Who are they? Who will tell us their names? To call to mind the obscurity and anonymity that so effaces the very existence itself of nearly the whole race of men is to find oneself bemused. For in the wake of this obscurity and anonymity comes the sheer specter of pointlessness.

Vanity. Vanity of Vanities says the preacher. Thou turnest man to dust. He is like grass. In the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers. We spend our years as a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing, says Macbeth. What is this quintessence of dust? Weary, stale, flat and unprofitable says Hamlet. Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, says Thomas Hobbes. The sheer statistics of the thing – everyone falling into pointless graves – overthrow any efforts we might wish to mount in the interest of solace. Grim stuff, but the Preacher would surely Amen that sentiment.

And if we think the future will be more kind in remembering us than we have been in remembering the past, Solomon will disabuse us here as well at the end of v.11: nor is there any remembrance of the later things yet to be among those who come after. You are somebody's great grandfather or grandmother (great aunt or uncle). And, take it to heart; they are not going to remember who you were or what you did. That is the Preacher's opening salvo. Don't shoot the messenger! We need to take the full measure of this. But, I assure you, that is the path to joy.

Next, the Preacher will turn his sights to human activity in the world, and then to wisdom itself, in chapter 1, verse 12-18. So, we will look at this passage as

having two halves. The first half, vv, 12-15, deals with the world. That is the world of men and things. The second half, vv.16-18, deals with wisdom itself. So we have the world and wisdom.

### **First, then the world.**

In v.12 we get the Preacher's qualifications for telling us about the world. He introduces himself for the first time as we shift from third to first person narrative. I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. What is new here, compared to verse 1, is the phrase "over Israel" which links the Preacher to Solomon. Only Solomon was king over ISRAEL in Jerusalem.

So the Preacher is Solomon, or "Solomonic," in wisdom. That is the point here. The preacher is telling you: if anybody is qualified to take you on this ride, I am. I have been given divine wisdom, and not only that, but as v.13 shows, I have taken the task at hand with utmost seriousness. I applied my heart to seek and to search out. First note – he applied his heart. He threw himself into this wisdom-driven quest.

The two words together here, seek and search out, convey the idea of full-orbed, no holds barred investigation. Inside out, upside down. He is fully engaged. Like Socrates, he believes the unexamined life is not worth living. The Preacher is going to scrutinize by WISDOM all that is done under heaven. Where he says something negative about wisdom, many will then say he means secular wisdom. But it is quite clear that it is Solomonic wisdom that is being exercised here. It is sorely tried, it seems to stumble and falter at points, but it is not secular wisdom.

By this wisdom he here investigates EVERYTHING that is done under heaven. No human activity is left out of view. And immediately we get Solomon's summary of what he has found. In the middle of v.13, he says, it is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

This is an immensely important statement for this book. The word for unhappy can be translated, evil or grievous. It is a grievous, unhappy, even evil, business that we are to be busy with. It is a kind of affliction. Here it becomes clear that Solomon is looking at the fallen world. The cursed world. But this, of course, is the real world. The world Christians and non-Christians both inhabit.

And notice that the curse, which results in this unhappy business, is something GOD HAS GIVEN. The state of affairs Solomon is describing is IMPOSED by God. So, he is looking at the unredeemed world, to be sure, but it is not a secular world. Secularism is itself a myth, a manifestation of the curse. The very brokenness that Solomon will catalog is a God-given brokenness. This reference to the curse is made even clearer by the phrase at the end of v.13 "the children of man." It's not the children of MEN, but the children of man. The Hebrew for

man is ADAM. The Children of Adam, the cursed and driven from Eden race; upon them a grievous business has been imposed. The thorns and thistles, the sweat of the brow, the corruption of our natures, the pain in childbearing, and finally, the return to the dust from which we were taken, are all in view here.

So, Solomon does not view the curse as a little nuisance. A sort of tax on an otherwise fairly manageable situation. Which is, if we are honest, how we in the West, view it. But the Preacher views it as a disaster. An almost unbearable divine imposition on the labor of man. It makes life an unhappy business. How could it be otherwise? It means the waterslide ride will be rocky and then end in the abyss. But we treat the whole thing like a rather unpleasant footnote to a basically pleasant story. We are comfortably numb to the grimness of the whole situation.

Solomon looks at the cursed world and, having seen it all, says in v.14: behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. You can't grasp it, or control it, or stop it, or call timeout, or manage it. You think you can. You really do. But the preacher sees that attitude as someone on the waterslide who thinks things are better off because they have the right sunscreen on. He hasn't been lulled to sleep. A cursed world is a deeply broken world. And, as v.15 shows: all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot undo this curse; they can't turn the unhappy business of life into a joyful thing.

Here the Preacher gives us a proverb to illustrate his point. What is crooked cannot be made straight. The world is bent and twisted, and the reason it cannot be straightened out is that GOD is the One who has bent it. Chapter 7, verse 13 says: Consider the work of God; who can make straight what He has made crooked? God has imposed the curse and its effects are pervasive. Labor as you might you can't remove it. You can gnaw at the edges of it. There is no doubt that the medical arts can mitigate some of the effects to be sure – they can make your waterslide a tad longer - but the world's fundamental shape remains crooked. It doesn't mean your labor or all human activity is useless. But it does mean it is useless in GAINING leverage over the grim realities of the fall.

Remember the driving question: what GAIN, what RESIDUE does your labor give you over all this? Go to the gym, eat right, take every precaution, manage your retirement account with skill. You are still the Texans at the Alamo, the Mexicans win. You are still the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, the Persians win. The grim realities win, sooner or later – every time. You can't untwist the world.

The second half of the proverb is: what is lacking cannot be counted. This is a truism in one sense. Of course if something is lacking, you can't count it. But the point here seems to be deeper. It means there are grievous deficiencies in our knowledge, it is not comprehensive, and even godly wisdom will not give us a great deal of what we'd like to know. The cursed world falls out in ways that are

beyond us, that won't allow us to count up and tabulate and calculate what it all means.

In chapter 7, right after the Preacher says "who can make straight what God has made crooked," he says, that the day of prosperity and the day of adversity both come from God, so that man can not figure out what will be after him. Providence is inscrutable to us in this world. We can't see the beginning from the end. Wisdom is not trying to get in the FAA's control tower for the flight of life. Only God is in the tower. You strap your seatbelt on and get on the plane. But we want to know what is hidden or what is lacking. We want to count things that are not ours to count.

Here we have one of the great pastoral lessons of Ecclesiastes. Wisdom means accepting the limitations and deficiencies of life, it means not trying to count what is lacking. More specifically, it means stop trying to interpret providence. We have an almost insatiable desire to do this. But Scripture doesn't tell us what God is doing in the details of our lives. It tells us in broad terms what he is doing in the earth and with the church as a whole, but the plan for our individual lives is NOT revealed. Yet we insist on making up the deficiency. We want to be in the tower.

Let me give you a rather typical example that I saw from a long-time Christian just this week. This person said: A happened (A was inconvenient and a disruption in this persons plans). So, A happened, so I had to do B. After I did B, C and D occurred. Then, I could see why the Lord allowed A to happen. Who among us doesn't do this kind of thing?

But its utter nonsense. This person thinks they know now why A happened, but they have no idea. They simply don't have enough information. They are NOT in the FAA tower of their lives. The fact is we have no idea how to grasp the meaning of much of the providence in our lives, because God has ordered things precisely so we can't see what came before or what comes after, so that we can't count what is lacking. The events of Providence in your life are not some kind of jigsaw puzzle that God wants you to figure out. So give up trying – that should be a joyful liberation. It is exhausting to shepherd the wind. Ceasing is a part of real wisdom. Accept the deficiency. The only question that matters is: are you being obedient and faithful in the situation, not "what does the situation mean?" Stop counting what can't be counted. Trying to live by interpreting providence is a form of perpetual adolescence. It's a refusal of the limitations of living as creatures in a fallen world.

## **Wisdom**

The second half of our text deals with wisdom itself. And in v.16 we get Solomon's qualifications again: I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me. So, he is the wisest king of Israel. His heart has

had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. The point is to convince you of the fitness of his resume. And here he is the consummate guide, not to the world in this case, but to wisdom itself. In v.17 he says: And I applied my heart to know wisdom. He had acquired great wisdom and he looked into the nature of wisdom itself. Not only did he apply his heart to know wisdom, but he applied it to know madness and folly as well. The idea here seems to be that he would use the contrary things, madness and folly, to explain wisdom. He would keep an eye, if you will, on the alternatives.

So, what did Solomon conclude about wisdom, madness and folly and trying to know them? We see it at the end of v.17: I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. Here he realizes that you can't grasp wisdom itself. You can't get much leverage out of it against the cosmos, against the forgetful mists of history, against the curse, against the horizon of death. In applying his heart to know wisdom, the Preacher is speaking about comprehensive wisdom and knowledge about, what he calls in chapter 7, the scheme of things. His quest is to figure out this world we all see and experience by wisdom. He wants a theory of everything, a grand unified theory of wisdom, but it eludes him. To seek these kinds of answers from wisdom is like striving after the wind.

The answers to what really matters cannot be read off your experience with the vaporizing world: How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man, how many seas must the white dove sail, before she sleeps in the sand, how many times must the cannon balls fly before their forever banned: the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

Go ahead, put all the big questions to creation, seek them out in the midst of this unhappy business; search for some coherent, exhaustive answers to the conundrums of a fallen world. You might as well shepherd the wind. Solomon again supports his conclusion with a proverb: For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

There is no release from the curse, the evil business. It taxes even wisdom. Wisdom comes with grief. It comes with mental anguish sorrow. Why is this?

Let me give you two simple reasons:

For one, true wisdom brings a mental clarity to the unhappy state of affairs we find ourselves in. It sees the world as it is. The Novocain has worn off for the truly wise – they FEEL the drilling. True wisdom means stripping away the noise, the distractions, the illusions, and seeing the world as it is. And what's left over ain't pretty – it's all twisted.

Second, wisdom leads to a profound sense of one's ignorance, one's finitude. In a fallen world, the more you know the more you realize you don't know. Probe one question seriously, and a dozen more open up on the horizon. Read a

serious book and the footnotes make you realize there are 80 more you haven't read.

You can't get to the bottom of it. You don't have time. You can't live long enough. And, anyway, you are not in the FAA tower for the flight. It's like grasping the wind. Yet, because we are made to KNOW, because we can't opt out of the quest, sorrow and vexation are our constant companions.

So, you are on the train now. It's not a fun-filled excursion. It's more like the 3:10 to Yuma. So what can we do? Well, you can't grasp the wind. But you can grasp Him who gives the wind of the Spirit. You can't grasp wisdom, but you can grasp Him who was made the wisdom of God for our sake. You won't unbend the world, you won't count what's lacking, and you won't remove sorrow and vexation from wisdom.

Grasp Jesus Christ and you'll be able to live in the world and be fruitful in the midst of this unhappy business. Grasp Him and you will be on the path to wisdom, vexation and all. All other ground, every inch of it, all other ground, is sinking sand. Amen.

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