

The Wisdom Literature

Lesson #17

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

Outline

I. ***Enjoying Life As A Gift From God (1:1-2:26)***

- A. The restlessness of life examined (1:1-11).
- B. The pleasures of life examined (1:12-2:11).
- C. The purposes of life examined (2:12-23).
- D. Conclusion (2:24-26).

Notes

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

- Prologue (1:1-3).
 - Solomon begins with a pronouncement of “vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” He deals with secular man, who sees no need of God, by meeting him on his own ground.
 - One must be careful so as to not consider this a blanket declaration of the total uselessness of the universe.
 - Solomon refers to all the activities of life. We want to place our confidence in this world, but the rest of the book will show that the mundane world is “good” if one realizes that it comes from the hand of God.
- Nothing has changed (1:4-7).
 - Solomon considers four examples from the realm of nature: the earth, sun, wind and waters. His concern is that while generations are coming and going, the earth stands. Nature does not change.
 - Life is short, so one should not trust life; it leads nowhere. Without God in our life, work profits us nothing. We live, we work, we die, and the beat goes on.
 - The transitory state of man is strikingly contrasted with the permanently abiding condition of the earth. However, the earth will not last forever. Man, like his world, is in ceaseless, monotonous, regular motion. Both are on a treadmill, but man just exists first.
- Nothing is new (1:8-11).
 - The world and its parts could easily be called “the restless ones,” ever hastening on, full of labor, weariness, and toil. There is an emptiness that only God can fill.
 - Nothing ever really appears that is new. If something appears new, it is only because our memory cannot recall its former introduction. Humans desperately want change, but we become bored eventually with everything.

- Not only does man fail to remember the former things, but those who follow us will not remember the accomplishments and people of our age. History repeats itself and we benefit very little from past mistakes. We just make a few ripples in the pool as far as being remembered. How many of us can remember our great-grandparents?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11

- Nothing is understood (1:12-18).
 - Solomon plunged enthusiastically into his investigation. He “searched” and “explored” all things under heaven. This means that he definitively investigated the root of the matter and examined it from all sides. He had no limits to his brains or wallet.
 - Solomon found this a “grievous task.” The sons of men labor and toil without finding any satisfaction or answer to the question, “What is the profit?” Yet all the time it is God who continues to prompt man’s heart to discover the truth.
 - He speaks from the standpoint of human wisdom. Operating on it alone, life is a real burden. We know that there must be more, but we cannot find it by human wisdom alone.
 - Verse 15 assures us that no investigation is going to be able to make up what is deficient and lacking from anything in this world. The problem calls for a solution greater than the sum of all its parts. Man did this when he sinned and earthly wisdom cannot solve the problem.
 - Wisdom, when viewed apart from the wisdom which comes from fearing God, increases grief instead of bringing relief to the question of profit. The more he learned, the more he realized what he did not know. This led to bitter disappointment.
- Solomon tested enjoyment (2:1-3).
 - The antics and enormous consumption of Solomon’s court is described in 1 Kings 4:20-25.
 - The whole plan was to sample mirth, pleasure, wine, and folly until he could determine what was “good” for the sons of men (Proverbs 17:22).
- Solomon tested employment (2:4-11).
 - Solomon had vast building improvements. He built the king’s palace, the house of the forest of Lebanon, and built the cities of Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Beth-horon, Baalath, and Tadmor in the wilderness.
 - Solomon also had enormous gardens, parks and ponds. To all these improvements, he also added many possessions. So great was his fortune that silver and gold were soon to be regarded in Jerusalem as stones (1 Kings 10:27; 2 Chronicles 1:15).

- However, the worth of all this acquiring and building had to be evaluated. The conclusion was that there was no advantage or profit to all of this. Hard work is not the answer to life. Something was sadly missing. Not one of all those good works had brought satisfaction or joy.

Ecclesiastes 2:12-23

- Solomon considered his wisdom (2:12-17).
 - Man's quest for the real profit of life seemed hopeless when Solomon had such unprecedented opportunities to test every conceivable benefit to be derived from the goods and projects of this world and had been left unsatisfied.
 - It became clear that wisdom is vastly superior to any of the acquisitions or pleasures secured from material possessions. The benefit of wisdom over folly is comparable to that of light over darkness. At least the wise man looks at what he is doing.
 - However, wisdom cannot insulate us from the ultimate attack of death. One event overtakes both the fool and the wise man. Both die and both are forgotten by men. Life in itself does not provide any gain to be able to answer the question of advantage or profit in this life.
 - All the labor spent in acquiring wisdom gives little, if any, ultimate advantage. As a result, Solomon became bitter about life. It was more of a burden than a blessing. Life without God is a grim reality.
- Solomon considered his wealth (2:18-23).
 - If wealth and wisdom are both dead-end trails in the search, perhaps there is satisfaction in laying up wealth for others or for one's children. Solomon was certainly not a quitter!
 - Regrettably, this also is no solution. There is no way of knowing whether the inheritance passed on to others will be used wisely or foolishly. In fact, after Solomon's death the kingdom split with Rehoboam as king in Jerusalem and Jeroboam as king in Samaria.
 - Solomon concludes that he will lose control over the "fruit" of his labor. This is the inevitable result of laboring "under the sun." How different is the picture for the Christian who one day will rest from his labor with the sweet peace that his works will follow after him (Revelation 14:13).
 - Solomon was consumed by work, but it provides no permanent value to man. God wants us to work, but not make it an idol.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

- The possession and ability to enjoy the blessings and "goods" of life is a gift from God. Everything good must be received and understood as

coming from the hand of God if they are to be used properly and joyfully.

- Men and women definitely do not have it within their ability to extract enjoyment from life or from any of its most mundane functions, such as eating, drinking, or earning a paycheck. Only God can give that ability to those who come to Him in belief and obedience. Health, riches, possession, position, sensual pleasures, honors, and prestige slip through man's hands unless they are received as a gift from God and until God gives man the ability to enjoy them and obtain satisfaction from them.
- Man, for all his empty and troublesome toil in accumulating as much as he can in as brief a time as possible, does so only to see it afterward converted to the uses of the good. In his hopes of finding joy in the security of owning what he has carefully stored up, the final stroke of irony is and always will be that the sinner will be forever cut off from that one possession dearer than all others -- joy itself.