

Vanity of Vanities

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2; Philippians 1:21

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The Lord not only teaches us how to live for Him by His Word, but also by the experience of others as well. In fact, if we are diligent students in the School of Christ, we will learn as much by the experiences of others as we learn by our own experiences. We are very poor students, indeed, if God sets before us examples in the lives of people, and we sweep aside all such lessons declaring, "I must personally pass through an experience myself before I can really learn."

The Word of God is our primary instructor in teaching us how to glorify and how to enjoy our God forever and ever. And it is the very Word of God that teaches us to carefully study the lives of others so that we can know the benefits of walking in obedience to Christ and the painful consequences of walking in disobedience to Christ (as we see in 1 Corinthians 10:11). Woe is me, if I must personally experience what the world has to offer before I can learn what the Lord would teach me about the world.

The real issue in all honesty is NOT that people believe they cannot learn from the sins of others, but rather that people want to experience all that the world, the flesh, and the devil tell them they are missing out on. The real reason is NOT, "I need to make sure that what I believe is not merely the faith of my parents, but my own faith." The real reason is NOT, "I want to be committed in my faith, and if I don't experience what the world, the flesh, and the devil have to offer, I will not really know the depths of depravity from which God has delivered me." The real reason is NOT, "I cannot know truth from error or right from wrong until I have first experienced what is in error and what is wrong." Away with all such dishonesty and self-deception! The real reason IS, "I want to do what I want to do because I want to do it." PERIOD. "I don't want to be told by God or anyone else that I cannot do what I want to do."

Solomon was the wisest man (apart from Christ) that has ever lived (according to 1 Kings 3:12). And yet he wanted to do what he wanted to do because he wanted to do it. He experienced all that the world has to offer: untold riches, worldwide fame, the greatest political leader at that time, the most beautiful women at his grasp, massive building projects to the memory of his name, the writer of hundreds of proverbs and songs, and a most learned teacher in natural science. He set his heart to enjoy life to the fullest, but in his pride he thought he could enjoy life to the fullest apart from God being his first love. For the Scriptures teach that Solomon's many wives led him away from the Lord, his first love (1 Kings 11:1-8). What is it in your life that leads you away from Christ, your first love: your work, your financial status, your family, the pleasures of life, some movie star, music star, or sports star, the cares of this life, or the fears of this life (including the fear of death)?

Ecclesiastes tells us how Solomon sought to find joy, peace, and contentment in what the world has to offer, but the more he sought happiness in the things of this world, the more he realized it was all vanity apart from the Lord. Today we begin to look at the personal experience of one who has a right to be heard. To ignore or disregard the testimony of Solomon is to invite certain destruction. This Lord's Day let us turn our attention to two questions: (1) Who Is the Human Author of Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1)? (2) What Conclusion Did the Author Reach about a Life Lived without Christ (Ecclesiastes 1:2)?

I. Who Is the Human Author of Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1)?

A. Solomon is most likely the human author even though his name is not specifically stated. Consider the following evidence.

1. It is “the son of David” that wrote Ecclesiastes (1:1) and likewise “the son of David” who wrote Proverbs (1:1). And yet Proverbs was specifically written by Solomon (according to Proverbs 1:1). No other king that reigned in Jerusalem over Judah (descending from David and AFTER Solomon) is ever called “the son of David” EXCEPT SOLOMON.

2. The author of Ecclesiastes was “king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). And again the author of Proverbs states that he was “king of Israel” (Proverbs 1:1).

3. The author of Ecclesiastes refers to his unrivaled wisdom in Ecclesiastes 1:16 (which was true of Solomon according to 1 Kings 3:12), and his unequalled wealth in Ecclesiastes 2:8 (which was also true of Solomon according to 2 Chronicles 1:15). The author shares in chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes several other successes he accomplished which also fit perfectly with Solomon and his reign.

4. Nearly all Christian scholars before the 19th century believed that Solomon was the human author of Ecclesiastes, and I have not found any convincing evidence to the contrary to alter that view in my own mind.

B. Solomon is described in Ecclesiastes 1:1 by way of three different relationships that he bears.

1. **His Church Relationship—“the Preacher.”**

a. The Hebrew word for “preacher” means “one who gathers or assembles.” The title of this book of the Bible is “Ecclesiastes”, which likewise means in Greek “one who gathers or assembles.”

b. The extended idea behind this Hebrew word is “one who gathers or assembles God’s people IN ORDER TO PREACH TO THEM.” For you see, Solomon was commissioned by God to deliver to His people this inspired message (as His prophet) concerning his own fall into sin and what he had learned about the futility of every area of life apart from faith in Christ and communion with Christ.

c. This Book of Ecclesiastes may be viewed as Solomon’s public acknowledgement of his own sin in pursuing his own desires apart from seeking God’s glory and honor. Solomon is bringing the congregation of God’s people together to bear witness to his own folly and to reunite himself to the faithful Church of God from which he had been separated.

d. As his father David publicly published his repentance unto the Church in that solemn penitential psalm (Psalm 51) after being restored from his sin, so likewise, Solomon, publicly testifies to the utter futility of his sin here in this inspired Book of Ecclesiastes (as the Preacher). Solomon has written this letter of repentance in order that we might be spared the heartache and agony of what he experienced in seeking happiness in life apart from Jesus, the joy of man’s desiring.

e. Perhaps this is the reason why Solomon’s name is not specifically stated in this book—he came as a humbled Preacher (due to his own folly), rather than as the exalted Solomon. He is the prodigal son who has returned, having found that the best the world has to offer is like pig’s food without Christ. There is no rhyme or reason to life without Christ. There is no meaning or purpose in life without Christ. There is no real enjoyment of life without Christ. It is all vanity, emptiness, and utter futility without Christ. This is Solomon’s message to us.

f. Dear ones, the sinful example of Solomon in following his own heart’s desires had scattered the people of God by way of a public scandal. He now seeks to gather God’s people together and heal their wounds by way of testifying to them where he went wrong, but also how the grace of God taught him to enjoy God while enjoying God’s creation. For you see, riches are not evil when a man’s first love is Christ. A beautiful wife is not evil when a man’s first love is Christ. Political honor is not evil when a man’s first love is Christ. Music, entertainment, and the pleasures of this life are not evil when a man’s first love is Christ. For, God gives us “richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17). However, all things in this life become evil when a man’s first love is not Christ. For when a man’s first love is not Christ, the things of this life for which

man desires, for which he hungers and thirsts, and for which he lives, become his first love and THAT IS IDOLATRY (a violation of the First Commandment—“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”).

g. Dear one, what is it for which you hunger and thirst above everything else, for which you dream above all else, and for which you live as the chief love of your life? The answer to those questions will almost certainly tell me whether you have a joy and contentment that no one or nothing in this world can take away. Solomon had humbly come to testify that life without Christ is zero. Paul agrees with Solomon when he declares: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Consider what Paul likewise says about everything that he might have considered a plus or a gain in his earthly life: Philippians 3:7-8.

h. Dear ones, when we have fallen away from Christ, the message of Solomon’s restoration assures us that where sin did abound, grace did much more abound. If our almighty and most merciful Savior can restore David from his adultery and murder, can restore Solomon from his idolatry and apostasy, can restore Elijah from his depression and discouragement, can restore Jonah from his hiding from God, can restore Peter from his pride and denying Christ, and can restore Thomas from his doubt and unbelief, He can restore you if you too have fallen. Will you not cast yourself today in faith upon the righteousness of Christ and the forgiveness of Christ which are of infinite worth for all eternity? The things in this life that we cherish will soon pass away, but the righteousness of our Savior will never diminish in its value for all eternity.

2. **His Natural Relationship—“the son of David.”**

a. Solomon’s sin was even more aggravated because of the many promises God made to him as “the son of David.” David was not a perfect father (far from it), but David was a godly father. Solomon had been raised in a covenant family and had been taught the love and wisdom found in Christ from the time he was small. Moreover, God promised to be a Father to Solomon and to bless him for the sake of David, his father. And yet Solomon disregarded his relationship to David his father and acted as though that relationship was nothing. Solomon states that he is “the son of David”, not only to identify himself as the author, but also to highlight the gravity of sin in backsliding from the joy and blessedness of his God and the God of his father, David.

b. Children, when you turn your backs upon Christ and do what you want to do because you want to do it, you increase the aggravation of your sin because you sin against the promises of God made to you in your baptism. You sin against the covenant vows made to God in your baptism wherein your baptism formally binds you to fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil all the days of your life. Only death itself can release you from that solemn vow in your baptism. Children, you have not been raised in a perfect home, but you have been and are being raised in a Christian home wherein you are loved, corrected, provided for, and prayed for (and will be until the dying breath of yourself or your parents). And dear covenant children, how are you treating these blessings from God? Solomon turned his back upon these blessings of being “the son of David” because he wanted to do what he wanted to do because he wanted to do it.

c. Covenant children, you may be tempted at times to complain that your parents have been overly protective and have sheltered you from the world in home schooling you, in setting godly standards for the music you hear, the movies you watch, and the books you read. Perhaps, dear children, you believe your parents have unnecessarily sheltered you by not allowing you to become friends with all those you desired, not allowing you to come home at night when you desired, or not allowing you to chat with anyone you desired. Isn’t it interesting that you would not consider your parents having sheltered you from the rain, the snow, and the cold as destructive to your well-being. You would not consider your parents having sheltered you from starvation as being “uncool.” You would not consider your parents having sheltered you from gangs, robbers, and criminals on the street as being over-protective. But, when your parents want to shelter you from the world, the flesh, and the devil (which can destroy your very soul in hell), that is just going too far. Let me tell you why you don’t mind being sheltered from the things that can destroy your body, but

you do mind being sheltered from the things that can destroy your soul: you have left your first love and want to do what you want to do because you want to do it. Dear beloved children of the Church of Jesus Christ, if you love the shelter that your parents provide for you from enemies that would destroy your body, love even more the shelter your parents provide for you from the enemies of your soul that would seek to destroy you in hell forever.

d. Solomon not only had the benefit of being raised in a covenant household, but also had the benefit of seeing and understanding the miserable consequences of sin when one leaves Christ as his first love. For, Solomon was fully aware of David's adultery and murder, since he was "the son of David." But Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, became the greatest fool that ever lived when he chose to ignore both the blessed promises of God made to him in his circumcision, and chose to ignore the devastating consequences of sin experienced in the life of his father, David. Solomon is pleading with you, dear covenant children, today not to be the fool that he was, as "the son of David."

3. **His Civil Relationship—"king in Jerusalem."**

a. Again, just as being "the son of David" identifies our author, so does his being "king in Jerusalem." But, even beyond the mere identification of our author as being Solomon, I would suggest that here again we find another reason for Solomon's aggravated sin. He had outward privileges and blessings that very few in this world have ever experienced. He sat upon the throne in Jerusalem, the city of God, wherein resided the very temple of the living God. God gave Solomon wisdom and riches unparalleled. And yet Solomon showed his thanklessness and ingratitude to God by doing what he wanted to do because he wanted to do it. Solomon was not humbled by his privileged status, but became proud and loved the gifts more than the Giver of those good gifts (the Lord his God).

b. Dear ones, we may not be kings or queens (in a literal sense), but we definitely live like kings and queens in this country, compared to what so many in this world have (or should I say, do not have). By the standards of most in the world, we live like royalty. We are not begging for food. We are not shivering in the streets for lack of clothing or shelter. There are not bombs blowing up in our streets from day to day (at least not yet). We have hospitals, doctors, and nurses to care for us when needed. We have cars to transport us from one location to another, rather than carts pulled by animals. We have many lawful recreations to enjoy. Have all these gracious blessings from God humbled you or calloused you to the voice of God? Do all these blessings from a good God make you more willing to do what He wants you to do or more willing to do what you want to do? Solomon testifies to us that he above all people enjoyed the blessings of this life, but rather than loving and obeying the God who had graciously bestowed these blessings upon him, he spat in the face of God and thanklessly and selfishly did what he wanted to do because he wanted to do it. How much time do we spend complaining about what we do not have, rather than rejoicing in what we do have? O the abomination of a thankless heart. So often we do not appreciate what we have until it is taken from us (whether it is our family, our health, our job, our Church, our safety etc.). Now is the time to be thankful to God, not once He has taken it from us.

C. Dear ones, the author of this book is Solomon, and we should carefully listen to what he has to say, because he comes to us as the humbled Preacher who gathers those he has scandalized by his sin. We should diligently listen to what Solomon would teach us, because he comes as the prodigal Son of David, who has learned from experience that true joy is not found in doing what he wanted to do, but is found in doing what God wanted him to do. We should attentively heed the wise instruction of Solomon, because he comes to us as the King in Jerusalem, who had every privilege this world has to offer, but could not find true joy in any of his pursuits apart from the joy of the Lord.

II. **What Conclusion Did the Author Reach about a Life Lived without Christ (Ecclesiastes 1:2)?**

A. Here is the simple conclusion Solomon has drawn from his personal search for happiness in the things of this world apart from Christ: “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Having set out this conclusion, Solomon then in succeeding verses and chapters begins to prove his conclusion by various arguments.

1. If I were to set before you a basic outline of Solomon’s argument from the book of Ecclesiastes, it would be this: (1) You cannot find true joy in this world when Christ is not your first love—this is utter futility (Ecclesiastes 1-6); (2) You can only find true joy in this world when Christ is your first love—this is true happiness (Ecclesiastes 7-12).

2. The Hebrew word for “vanity” means “vapor.” Why does Solomon call all the things of this life a vapor when considered apart from Christ?

a. Solomon calls the things of this life a vapor, because the things of this world are temporal like a vapor and are passing away. We cannot hold on to the things in this life after death. Everything in this life will pass from our grasp no matter how tightly we have squeezed them and embraced them while alive. Even if we are the strongest of men in this world, our hands and arms will fall limp by our side and no longer be able to hold that which was most important to us as our eyelids close and as we breathe our last breath at death. Everything in this life is a passing vapor.

b. Solomon calls the things of this life a vapor, because they do not satisfy to the quenching of a man’s true thirst for joy and contentment. If you were dehydrating, your tongue parched, and your lips cracked, and someone offered to satisfy your thirst, which would you want: a glass of water or a glass of vapor? Dear ones, Solomon, the Preacher, says that the things in this life are a vapor to those who thirst for true joy and contentment. The things of this life make huge promises to satisfy your thirst, but they do not deliver, because they cannot do so. Only the living water which Christ gives can do so. That is not to say that we cannot enjoy the good things of this life that God has made and has given to us (1 Timothy 6:17). It is simply to say that by themselves and without Christ, they are a vapor.

B. Solomon not only declares that all things “under the sun” (without Christ) are vanity, futility, or vapor in bringing joy, but he declares it in a superlative form (and twice for emphasis) when he says, “Vanity of vanities” (i.e. utter vanity). That’s like saying “the holy of holies” (i.e. the most holy), or “the king of kings” (i.e. the supreme king).

1. Thus, dear ones, let it be known today from the lips of him who was the wisest man that ever lived and became the most foolish man that ever lived, that doing what you want to do because you want to do it is utterly futile and hopeless in satisfying the deep longing of every man to have joy, peace, and contentment. Without Christ, it is a mere vapor that cannot satisfy. But with Christ, you will be able to enjoy to its fullest whatever God gives to you in this life.

2. Perhaps the New Testament parallel to “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” is found in Matthew 16:26: Read it in closing.

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