

Man Vanishes Away
Ecclesiastes 1:3-7; Psalm 90:5
November 28, 2004
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There are many “How To” books that you will find in any bookstore on almost any subject that you desire: How to financially succeed; How to raise children; How to live a long life; How to pray; How to grow a garden etc.

Solomon gives us a book that is designed to tell us, “How to have a true and lasting joy and contentment in this life and forevermore.” Here is a book written by one whose credentials excel those of any writer today, regardless of his/her credentials. According to God, the author of Ecclesiastes was the wisest man that ever lived. Solomon has a story to tell about how to find a joy, peace, and contentment that is true and enduring. He first tears down all the vain props upon which we have built our lives, and then he begins to erect the indestructible foundation upon which our lives must be built if we would know that lasting joy for which men seek and which alone satisfies man’s heart.

This is the thrust of Solomon’s message to us. Let us consider the following two main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 1:3-7 this Lord’s Day: (1) All Is Vanity because Man’s Labor apart from Christ Brings No Gain (Ecclesiastes 1:3); (2) All Is Vanity because Man’s Life apart from Christ Will Soon Be Over (Ecclesiastes 1:4-7).

I. All Is Vanity because Man’s Labor apart from Christ Brings No Gain (Ecclesiastes 1:3).

A. In the previous sermon, we learned that Solomon, the Preacher (as he calls himself), was commissioned by God to gather the people of God together in order to deliver to them this inspired message 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: Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher vanity of vanities; ALL IS VANITY (Ecclesiastes 1:2). He who was the wisest man that ever lived (apart from Jesus Christ) is about to save you and me so much pain and misery in this life and everlasting destruction in the life to come by his own personal experience and observation, if we will but hear him by faith and live.

B. Since this inspired Book of the Bible was humanly authored by Solomon, the Preacher, the son of David, and king in Jerusalem (as we saw in Ecclesiastes 1:1), the date of composition must be fixed somewhere between the years 971 to 931 B.C. which are the years he reigned as king in Jerusalem. It has been suggested that due to the content found in the three inspired books Solomon wrote, that this is likely the order in which he wrote them: (1) SONG OF SOLOMON (OR SONG OF SONGS as it appears in the Hebrew Bible) during the earlier part of his reign, where we see a beautiful love story written apparently before Solomon’s fall into sin; (2) PROVERBS in the middle years of his reign, where he instructs his own son concerning the wonders of a godly wisdom before his fall into sin; and (3) ECCLESIASTES in the latter years of his reign after his fall into sin and subsequent restoration to God. Here in Ecclesiastes there is an emphasis upon trusting and obeying God while one is yet young and before the evil days come (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10; Ecclesiastes 12:1).

C. Many have come away from having read the inspired message of Solomon in Ecclesiastes with the idea that it is a very negative book. I would have to disagree with that evaluation. To the contrary, I believe the thrust of Solomon’s message to us is very positive. For I don’t think Solomon’s message is merely how sour and bitter life became to him, but rather how God taught him from his own experience that life will be

absolutely futile if it is lived apart from faith and obedience to Christ. But life will also be filled with meaning and purpose and with joy and contentment, if it is lived in faith and obedience to Christ. In other words, Solomon has to lay out the bad news first before we can fully appreciate the good news.

1. It is very much like a presentation of the Gospel to someone who is self-righteous and believes he has lived a “good” life. He will not hear nor appreciate the Good News of Jesus Christ until his conscience is smitten with the Law of God, and he is brought low to see his hopeless condition before a holy God. Dear ones, when we understand our depravity and sin, and understand that we deserve nothing from a holy God except His eternal wrath and condemnation, the message of love in Jesus Christ becomes the best news we could ever hear.

2. So likewise in Ecclesiastes, much of what Solomon says will appear at times to be filled with that which is negative. But understood in the light that I have just shared, you will see that Solomon is seeking to drive sinful men, women, and children, who are so consumed with the love and cares of this life, to faith in Christ and obedience to Christ.

3. Dear ones, the problem that Solomon addresses in Ecclesiastes is universal to all cultures, and ours is certainly no exception. How can we be devoted Christians in following the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and obedience to all of His commands and yet enjoy all of the good things given to us in this life by God?

a. In order to do that, we must avoid two sinful extremes: (1) The first sinful extreme we must avoid is to condemn all things in this life that may bring us pleasure and comfort; and (2) The second sinful extreme we must avoid is to make all things in this life that may bring us pleasure and comfort our life and reason for living. Either extreme is sinful and is condemned by God in His Holy Word.

b. The biblical view is that expressed by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. There we find that not only food, but “every creature” (1 Timothy 4:4) God gives to us may be thankfully enjoyed, as long as it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer to His glory. In fact, note the strength of Paul’s argument when he says in 1 Timothy 4:4 that “nothing” that is a creaturely blessing or comfort in this life is even to be “refused” as if it were sinful. Certainly, there may be valid reasons why at times we voluntarily refuse creaturely blessings and comforts in this life to serve either Christ or our neighbor (such as when we fast and go without food, or when we voluntarily avoid the use of certain creaturely blessings or comforts because we have abused them and they more control us rather than we controlling them), but we do not do so because that creaturely blessing or comfort is sinful in itself to enjoy (as a gift from God).

D. Let us now turn to our text in Ecclesiastes 1:3 where we shall hear Solomon teach us, that all is vanity because man’s labor apart from Christ brings no gain.

1. Note first THE SUBJECT of Solomon’s question here is that of PROFIT to a man. Sure there are many things in this life that man can experience, but Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived is interested in that which will PROFIT a man. Solomon does not believe we must personally experience all of life (whether good or bad) before we can know what is truly profitable (as an advantage or gain) in life to us. Solomon comes to us, having himself sadly experienced all that life has to offer, and he comes to you and me today with the divinely inspired answer to the question: What profit hath a man of ALL his labor which he taketh under the sun? The answer is absolutely nothing. It is all vanity and insufficient to bring true joy and lasting contentment.

2. Note secondly the EXTENT to which Solomon applies his evaluation of what is profitable in this life: ALL his labor, ALL his efforts, ALL his endeavors, ALL his plans, ALL his dreams, ALL his successes, and ALL his accomplishments. Solomon does not exclude any type of work that man may do from his assessment. Some may want to make exceptions and say that certainly there is profit in some things in this life apart from Christ. What about those who sacrifice their lives to feed the hungry, who devote all of their time in caring for orphans, who work tirelessly to find ways to overcome blindness, deafness, paralysis, heart

diseases, cancer, and a host of other debilitating physical problems? What about those who make every effort to live a moral life, who attend church regularly, who read their Bibles, who pray for others? One may reason, "Maybe those who spend their lives on themselves will find no profit at all from all their labors, but surely those who spend their lives on others (apart from Christ) will find some profit from all their labors. Solomon's response is that ALL of the labor of man (without exception) is vanity and without profit.

3. Note thirdly, the PERSPECTIVE from which Solomon declares that all the work of man (whether personal, familial, religious, or civil) is without profit. It is from the perspective of one who lives "UNDER THE SUN." Solomon is saying that as he applies Divine understanding and wisdom to the subject of that which is profitable in achieving joy in this life, he concludes that all of man's labor that is performed "under the sun" is without profit, advantage, or gain to a man. We need to understand what Solomon means when he uses this prepositional phrase "under the sun."

a. This prepositional phrase ("under the sun") is unique to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is used nowhere else in the Bible. However, it appears 29 times in Ecclesiastes, and so we will run into it many times before we have completed our study of Ecclesiastes.

b. "Under the sun" refers to man's life and existence upon the earth considered apart from Christ. If a man chooses to live his life apart from faith and obedience to Christ (i.e. apart from a heavenly perspective), as if Christ has nothing to say about the way he lives his life, then he is living a life that is merely "under the sun". He does not look at life or any of his work from heaven's perspective, but only from earth's perspective, which either leaves Christ out of the equation altogether or else relegates Christ and His commandments to such a low place in his life that he practically thinks, speaks, and acts as if Christ does not exist. Such a man is a practical atheist. This is the man who lives "under the sun." This is the labor that is done "under the sun." It is this type of labor and all of this type of labor that Solomon declares to be without profit, advantage, or gain. For it is all temporary like a vapor, and will come to an end. It cannot bring true joy and satisfaction to man any more than a mere vapor can satisfy the thirst of a man that is dehydrated.

c. But let me cautiously interject at this point that I would not want to infer that there is absolutely no profit in any sense to a man, a woman, or a child in the work they might do, even apart from Christ. There is no spiritual benefit before God. There is no true joy or enduring contentment that comes to people who live apart from faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. That is what Solomon is saying, and it is absolutely true. However, is there any benefit (in any sense at all) to the work done by people apart from Christ? Yes, of course there is. How many unbelievers have been used to invent many conveniences that make our life much more comfortable or to invent ways to make our life much more safe? How many unbelievers have stretched our knowledge of the world around us? Does not exercise and taking care of one's body have some profit even to unbelievers as far as the physical quality of life they may live? Does not the morality of the unbelievers around you (by way of God's common grace) make your life and the life of your children safer? So you see, Solomon is not saying there is no profit in any sense to the work of men, women, and children apart from Christ. He has specifically qualified the sense in which he speaks of the profit to man. There is no profit to finding true lasting joy, peace, or contentment in all of the works of man that are done "under the sun" (i.e. apart from faith in Christ and apart from obedience to Christ).

d. However, the other side of the coin that is implied by Solomon is that all men, women, and children who live "above the sun", and all of their works of obedience that are "above the sun" through faith in Jesus Christ, are full of profit, advantage, and gain in this life and in heaven forevermore. If you could see a video movie of your life lived apart from Christ from beginning to end, where you gain no true joy, peace, or contentment and actually are cast into everlasting torment in hell, why would you still choose to walk that empty road? Yet in the life and words of Solomon, you can see a video of your life, even if you reached every attainment or accomplishment that you believe would truly make you happy. And the real conclusion to your life's story if you choose to walk that path is that you will gain nothing but will lose even everything you thought you had gained in this life at death. Dear ones, ALL IS VANITY BECAUSE ALL MAN'S

LABOR IN THIS LIFE APART FROM CHRIST WILL BRING HIM NO PROFIT, ADVANTAGE, OR GAIN.

II. All Is Vanity because Man's Life apart from Christ Will Soon Be Over (Ecclesiastes 1:4-7).

A. Solomon now moves from the vanity of man's WORK without Christ, to the vanity of man's LIFE without Christ. Man's WORK apart from Christ is without profit to him. Man's LIFE apart from Christ is particularly brief to him.

1. Solomon contrasts the brevity of man's life that is lived "under the sun" with that of the relative permanence of the earth in verse 4. Whereas individual men, women, and children are continually appearing on the stage of life and then disappearing from the stage of life, the earth is ever steadfast. A man is transient—here today and gone tomorrow. Not so of the earth—it continues in its firmness outliving any individual human being. The earth has seen even the passing of the man who lived longest upon it—Methuselah who lived 969 years. If a man only lives his life ("under the sun") and lives it without Jesus Christ, he will appear like a vapor, only to disappear in a moment. If a man is seeking profit only in this life, he doesn't have much time to make such a profit, or much time to enjoy such a profit. For Moses compares this life to a dream of one night that is gone as quickly as one awakes (Psalm 90:5). From a mere investment perspective, if you had a choice to invest your life so that you enjoyed the benefits for all eternity or to invest your life so that you enjoyed the benefits for the length of a dream, which of those two investments ought you to choose? There is no question.

2. Solomon then contrasts the brevity of a man's life that is lived "under the sun" to that of certain permanent ongoing processes that man observes upon the earth.

a. In verse 5, the permanent process of the sun rising and setting outlives any man upon the earth.

b. In verse 6, the permanent process of the circuits of the wind outlives any man upon the earth.

c. In verse 7, the permanent process of rain that falls into the rivers and which flows into the sea, and then is evaporated into the sky to form clouds, which then continues the process over and over again—this, too, outlives any man upon the earth.

B. There is in a general sense the universal brevity of all men upon the face of the earth (whether they are trusting in Christ alone for their eternal salvation or not), when compared to eternity. But in a very particular sense, I would submit that the brevity of all men ("under the sun"), who are without Christ, is particularly true. Why can Solomon speak of life being particularly brief to a man who lives "under the sun"?

1. Because death comes suddenly and unexpectedly to those "under the sun". They have not prepared for their certain appointment with death. You may ignore or be late for appointments here upon the earth, but no one will be late for their appointment with death. Thus, death catches those "under the sun" by surprise. It comes quickly to them (Ecclesiastes 9:12).

2. Because death reveals that those who live "under the sun" have excluded Christ from their lives and have rather trusted in the things of this life, which are suddenly snatched from their grasp. They may gain the whole world, but they will lose it all (along with their soul).

C. When I was in my childhood, teens, and even early adulthood, I did not fully appreciate how brief life really is. Often it is not until certain life-changing events occur that we awaken to how quickly life is really moving. Like a race—a day, a week, a month, and even a year seem to be sprinting through the racetrack of time. When we are young we feel so energetic and strong—almost invulnerable to aging or to dying. Do you remember when important events in your life took (what seemed like) an eternity to arrive? You wanted so desperately to reach the magical age of 16, then 18, and then 21. It was like a marathon race

being played in slow motion. But then something happened somewhere at some time, and then life became a sprint. The speed was turned up to fast forward. You wondered what happened to age 25, 30, 40, and I'm wondering what happened to age 50. We can smile about these things because they are all common to our experience. But dear ones, there is a colossal reality to these observations. LIFE IS BRIEF. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Whether one only lives to be 20 years or lives to be 100 years, a similar testimony will be shared by those in both cases: Where did my life go?

1. Dear ones, once life seems to enter the sprint stage of the race, there really is no way to slow it down, because that really is what is happening. Since we cannot slow the speed at which a day, a week, a month, or a year pass, we must seek to live each day, each week, each month, and each year as if it were our last one, so that we do not waste our lives on things in this world that have no lasting benefit or profit.

2. Dear friend, if God revealed to you that you had one month to live, how would you spend it? Would you try to enjoy every earthly pleasure in this life that you thought you had missed? Or would you curl up into a cocoon and fearfully wait until the day was finally reached? Or would you trust Christ, walking in obedience to His commandments out of love for Him, seeking to enjoy Him and that which He has blessed you with in this life? You see, dear ones, you and I have no guarantee that we will even have thirty days to live. It could be seven days or even one day. That we do not know. However, we may be assured of this: God has determined all of our days in this life, however long that may be (according to Job 14:5).

Therefore, we are taught by God to number our days in order that we may apply our hearts to wisdom rather than to foolishness and vanity (Psalm 90:12). Solomon says it is vain for us to live as if we are certain that there will be a tomorrow for any of us. That is how a man lives who lives "under the sun" and apart from Christ. The Christian, however, lives with a knowledge that this life will end for all of us—death is coming. But death need not frighten the Christian, for to die is gain, is profit, and is an advantage to the Christian (Philippians 1:21). For to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6). Death need not bring fear to the Christian, but rather life and joy forevermore without any interruption. No more tears, no more sorrow, nor more misery or pain, no more sin or temptation; but rather continual and everlasting communion with Christ, with the saints of history, and with the blessed angels forevermore. Thus, however long the Lord shall give us life on this earth—whether it is 20 years or 100 years, whether it is a life lived in riches or poverty, whether it is a life lived in pain or without pain—it is a life that is neither vain nor brief to the child of God (who lives above the sun with heaven's perspective, rather than under the sun with the world's perspective). For, dear ones, it is a life that has meaning, purpose, and hope IN CHRIST. It is a full life when it is a life lived in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ (whether it be 20 years or 100 years). And I can promise you, you will not have one regret in heaven that you lived your life for Christ regardless of what it might have cost you here upon the earth, regardless of the suffering, persecution, ridicule, or loss you might have suffered for Jesus Christ. However, there will be innumerable regrets for all those in hell, who lived their lives without Christ. The testimony of Job is the testimony of all those who know how to live life to the fullest, regardless of what they experience here upon the earth: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

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