

The Preacher's Cry - Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

Introduction

The story of Eutropius and Chrysostom

There was a man named Eutropius who lived in the Byzantine Empire in the 4th century. Though born a slave, Eutropius eventually rose to great power and fortune to the point that he eventually served as the highest-ranking official in the Eastern empire serving as the closest advisor to the emperor Arcadius.

Eutropius, however, was no Joseph who used his incredible rise from slavery to advisor to the emperor as one to bless and benefit those underneath him. Eutropius greatly abused his imperial power, and his actions greatly angered Arcadius' wife Eudoxia.

Eudoxia plotted a campaign to have Eutropius removed which resulted in him being sentenced to death. In fear for his life, he slipped away from his palace and fled to the Hagia Sophia, the famous church in Constantinople. There he clung to the altar and cried for sanctuary. Soon a large crowd of angry soldiers and citizens surrounded the church crying out that Eutropius be released and put to death. The preacher told Eutropius that he would be able to stay there for the night. That preacher was John Chrysostom the Bishop of Constantinople.

Eventually the crowds turned away, but the following day was Sunday, and so an even larger crowd returned the next morning eager to hear what the famous preacher would do. As he stepped into the pulpit, the crowd looked at him with great anticipation, Eutropius still clinging desperately to the altar. The man who once was so esteemed and so well-off was now a sad spectacle of despair.

Chrysostom opened up his Bible, and the text he chose to preach from that morning was Ecclesiastes 1:2, the passage we will look at this morning. His primary illustration was the decline and fall of the man who now cringed to the altar.

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Chrysostom stated “here was a man who days before had been the second most powerful man in the world, and yet here he was now having lost everything, his position, his wealth, his freedom, and quite possibly his life. He continued that Eutropius was “more wretched than a chained convict, more pitiable than a menial slave, more indigent than a beggar wasting with hunger, I could never convey to you in words the agony he must be suffering, from hour to hour expecting to be butchered.”

Chrysostom’s purpose in all of this was not to condemn Eutropius but to save him, and in the process give his listeners the gospel. In doing so he appealed to Ecclesiastes and challenged his listeners to recognize the vanity of their own existence.

Whether rich or poor one day every one of them would have to leave their possessions behind, and every one them would face the judgment of a holy God. What they should hope should happen to them on the day of judgment they should now offer Eutropius, mercy at the table of Christ.

The sermon clearly pierced the hearts of the listeners for as Chrysostom came to a close he could see tears of pity in the eyes of the people, and that day Eutropius was able to walk out of the church with his life spared—a life saved by the preaching of Ecclesiastes.

I pray that as we now begin this series through this very interesting book of the Bible that lives would saved through this preaching, but the life I am referring to is that which comes only through faith in Christ and lasts forever.

READ PASSAGE

Background

-Few books of the Bible have been more controversial and debated than Ecclesiastes.

1. Authorship
2. Contradictions

3. No mention of YHWH, only Elohim.

4. Inclusion of what seems to be other world philosophies.

-It is one of the wisdom books of the OT, but its wisdom is far more similar to Job than Proverbs.

Qoheleth and the Feast of Booths

-Ecclesiastes was one of the major readings during the Feast of Booths (or thatched huts), later on it would be called the feast of tabernacles.

- It was an agrarian festival that celebrated the end of the harvest in the fall.
- This feast connects celebration with the long tiresome journey of the Israelites in the desert wilderness when they lived in tents and confronted the harsh wilderness realities.
- It commemorated their march through the place of testing, temptation and deprivation. The desert that dangerous place of freedom, where they no longer existed in the bondage of Egypt, but were not yet safe in the Promised land.
- For Israel the wilderness wandering was their time between the already (liberation), and the not yet (security and shalom).
- There was no accident why this book was chosen to be read for this Feast, and I believe we must read it as well in connection to the meaning of the Feast of booths.
- The festival was about the fragility of human shelter, it was about the absolute sovereign kingship of God, and it was a festival that called the people to joy irregardless that it marked the end of a productive season and the beginning of winter.
- The themes of Ecclesiastes are directly in line with all of those.
- The fact that this book was read for the Feast of booths shows that only by passing through the experience of vanity can people enter into a

covenant with God who gives everything: harvest and grape gathering as well as his presence and the Law.

- However more important than all of this is the fact that during the festival the people would construct these lean to temporary fragile shelters to live in for 7 days as a reminder of their own lean to temporary fragile existence, and that through it all it was only God who could protect them.
- No book of the Bible speaks more eloquently on the fragility of human existence, challenges are entire way of thinking, requires that we intently examine our own conscience, and sweeps away all of our rock solid certainties in ourselves and our stuff than this one.
- Ecclesiastes leaves us alone with our precarious destiny, stripped bare to experience the only genuine security there is: the security offered by the Sovereign Master of all creation and history.

Why preach through this book Verse by Verse.

1. Because it is God's word, and every syllable we read is profitable for our growth in godliness.
2. Because it is honest about all the troubles of life. Melville called it "the truest of all books."
 - a. Futility and frustration of a fallen world.
 - b. Drudgery of work
 - c. Injustice of governments
 - d. The dissatisfaction of foolish pleasure
 - e. And the "Treadmill of Existence.
3. Because it shows us what will happen to us if we choose what this world offers instead of what God has to give.
4. Because it ask all the tough questions.
 - a. What is the meaning of life?

- b. Why am I depressed?
 - c. Does God care?
 - d. Why the suffering and injustice?
 - e. Is life worth living?
5. Because it will help us worship the one true God as He rightly is:
- a. Mighty Creator
 - b. Sovereign Lord
 - c. Transcendent and Powerful ruler of the Universe.

Ecclesiastes is a book for skeptics and agnostics, for people on a quest to know the meaning of life, for the Christian battling doubt, and for Christians who are grappling with the trials of life. It will show us how to have victory over the vanity of this life all to the glory of God.

Transition: Now with that introduction let us take a closer look at our specific text this morning.

I. The Preacher's Identity - V.1

"The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem."

As we begin our journey through this book it is Vital that we pinpoint who this preacher is.

Now the word Preacher here is the Hebrew word Qoheleth, "it literally means to gather, collect, or assemble for the point of worship. It is the title of this book, but in the Septuagint it was translated as Ekklesia which is the Greek for assembly, and is often the word in the NT translated as the church.

Luther was the first to translate Qohelet as the preacher, many think that this was clearly reading too much into the title, others thought the transla-

tion teacher was appropriate and others believed the best thing to do was to leave the name untranslated and simply call the teacher by the Hebrew name Qohelet.

All of these are appropriate, but I will stick with the modern translation of preacher and will later show why I believe that is an appropriate title.

The preacher is referred to as, the Son of David, King in Jerusalem.

All though many kings came from the royal line of David, only Solomon was the only one who ruled immediately after David in Jerusalem, prior to the Kingdom being split. Furthermore, many of the things that the Preacher teaches about his life sounds exactly like King Solomon.

Ecclesiastes 1:16 “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.”

The amassing of great wealth, the many building projects, the women which were kept by the preacher as concubines, all characterize the same kind of life that Solomon lived. Even at the end of the book in chapter 12 the preacher is described as “weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.”

So why all the debate, isn't it pretty obvious that Solomon is the preacher here? I would argue that it is absolutely obvious that Solomon is indeed the preacher who is teaching us in this book.

The issue is not so much who the preacher is, but who the author is?

You see the most natural way to read it is that Solomon wrote the book and simply refers to himself as the Preacher, and I would fully argue that I find no arguments substantial against that claim except for one.

The Hebrew that is used in this book is much different than that which is found in the other writings we have from Solomon. The Hebrew is from a later date, I would argue the early post-exilic period (Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah.)

(Explain possible Zerubbabel connection)

So it is my opinion that Solomon was likely not the author, however the author gives us what I believe was Solomon's teaching to Israel right before the end of his life.

And I believe in this moment Solomon was indeed a preacher to them, and a preacher to us. For in 1 Kings 8 the Bible says the Solomon "assembled Israel" and it repeatedly says that Israel formed an assembly. And in an assembly like this the aged Preacher Solomon gave the people this powerful discourse.

Why does the Preacher's identity matter as Solomon?

Who better than King Solomon to illustrate the futility of life without God? The man had everything that anyone could ever want. But the world was not enough. God had given Solomon everything and yet he let his foreign wives turn his heart from that Very God.

I believe this discourse reflects a man whose eyes have been opened once again and in repentance and remorse he gives this final sermon for all to hear that if he could not be satisfied by this vain world, than there is no treasure in this world that will satisfy the longings of the human, and that such satisfaction will only be found in a right relationship with the Sovereign God of creation.

II. The Preacher's Thesis (v.2)

-Picture the aged Solomon stepping into the assembly of Israel, perhaps it had been a while since they had heard from him in this light.

- What would his message be to Israel.

- As he gained his place he immediately cries out to the crowd:

"Habel habalim"

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

-Not the most encouraging opening. With these encapsulating superlatives, the preacher takes the whole sum of human existence and declares that it is utterly “hebel.”

*This is another one of those words that are very difficult to pinpoint an exact meaning. However, because this is the thesis (the main argument) of the preacher we can not merely glaze over it, but get to the bottom of what he is trying to tell us regarding all that he is going to describe.

-The most literal meaning of the word is vapor or smoke or breath. Something that is here and gone. This would be fitting as life is very much like that, life is here and gone, it is elusive, ephemeral and enigmatic. Every time we try to wrap our hands around life, it slips right through our fingers.

The name Abel comes from this word hebel, and how fitting that is. Abel's life is the absolute picture this transitory nature of life. Abel's very existence is marked by being here and then being gone. His very name marked the very description of his existence, what the preacher is saying is that we are all Abel.

Abel was righteous and lived a life of faithfulness to God (Heb. 11:4), and yet his life was taken in a moment because of the wickedness of another. We are here today and gone tomorrow, all is a breath, all is smoke, all is a vapor, vanity of vanities.

Even more hebel means that which deceives or is an illusion, and is also ostentatious which means that we use it to create illusions of ourselves for others

When the preacher says all is hebel is saying it is all an illusion, a false sense of security, a false sense of hope. It deceives us into thinking we are more special than we are, different than those around us, thinking we are invincible.

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Wealth, wisdom, pleasure, status are all masks which we try to wear in order to fool others that we are satisfied. Oh how many have fooled the world of their happiness, and took their lives in the same evening. Vanity of vanities.

The preacher intends to use all of this in his choice to say that all is Hebel. To use the word “vanity” is to say that our brief, fleeting lives are marked by empty futility, or as the preacher will say elsewhere it is “chasing after the wind.”

Some people try to find meaning in what they can know and learn about life, the preacher will say that such wisdom brings much sorrow.

Some people think they will be satisfied with all the pleasure money can buy the preacher says none of it was gain, only vanity.

The preacher worked himself nearly to death, trying to do something significant that would fill his soul with satisfaction and it all came up empty.

Sooner or later this experience finds us all, we indulge in pleasures thinking they will bring us satisfaction and we are only left more dissatisfied than we were before. We have grown depressed because we feel like no-ones who ultimately will never be successful enough and ultimately our names will never be written in stone or the memories of mankind. Then there is that ever present fear that haunts us all, and will stare every one off us in the face.

Yet, the preacher never once denies the existence or the absolute sovereignty of God, but that even adds more questions for him. Why is there injustice, evil, wickedness? Why does this life seem like a broken cistern which is never full, but always empty. Many of you know exactly how the preacher feels in that.

The End of the Matter

Many of you are thinking man this book just sounds depressing. The preacher certainly has a darker view of earthly living, yet he never de-

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nounces God or curses him or denies his existence. Why so dark, what can we learn from this book and from this preacher's message.

In a world where there is so much tragedy why would we study a book like this and what can we possibly learn from its gloomy perspective”

Though it is true the preacher takes a sober view of life, never once flinching from its complexities and confusions, it is just as equally true that he has a solid hope in the goodness of God as well as lasting joy in the beauty of this God's gracious gifts.

This is why the preacher starts his message this way. He wants to show us the futility of everything earthly, so we will put our hope in the Everlasting. He will tear down our worldly perspectives in order to build up an eternal one.

In v. 3 he gives us the sphere by which this thesis is being argued, “under the sun.” He will repeat that almost thirty times in his discourse.

In other words, when we view life with a only that which is under the sun exist perspective, life is vanity, here and gone, empty, a vapor, futile, an illusion, life is an enigma if all that is, is that which is under the sun.

But when we look to God with reverence and awe, we are able to see meaning and joy in this life irregardless of how vain it is in and of itself. When we have a right relationship with God we are able to see significance in everything we do in light of eternity. We recognize that every seemingly meaningless and repetitious moment of our lives is actually working for our good and the glory of God. Only when we have the right view of God, can we have a right view of life.

For this is how the book will end, “The end of the matter, all has been heard, Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecc. 12:13). Proverbs opens similarly “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).

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In other words fearing God, (Having a sense of awe and wonder, and majesty) is not just the beginning, but the end of man —the goal of our existence.

But in order to rightly know and enjoy God properly, we first have to see the emptiness of life without him. We need to become thoroughly disillusioned with every illusion that draws us away from him. That in order to put our hope in the one who will never deceive, we must first put away everything else that does deceive.

It is written to remind us that our lives are just like the booths that Israelites set up in the wilderness, temporary and fragile, and that our only hope of security and provision is found in the Sovereign Creator.

To this end, Ecclesiastes will give us the truest assessment of what life is like apart from the grace of God.

This makes it a hopeful book, not a depressing one; ultimately its worldview is positive, not negative. Like a good pastor, the preacher shows us the absolute vanity of life without God, so that we finally stop expecting earthly things to give us lasting satisfaction and learn to live for God rather than for ourselves.

John Wesley preached also preached through this great book, and the night before he began doing so he wrote this in his journal, “Never before had I so clear a sight either of its meaning or beauties. Neither did I imagine, that the several parts of it were in so exquisite a manner connected together, all tending to prove the grand truth, that there is no happiness out of God.”

What Wesley discovered is the life changing truth that I hope Ecclesiastes will teach us as well: The truth that we will never find any true meaning, hope, satisfaction, or lasting joy, unless and until we find it in God.

If we learn this lesson well it will draw us closer to Jesus, for only through him can we rightly know God and therefore, rightly see the world he has created us into. All of creation is under the bondage of sin, and it is there

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that the futility and vanity of life finds its origin, but only Christ can break the bondage of a soul who is trapped in the vanity of Life.

Thus Ecclesiastes will help us see that only in Jesus can we have victory over vanity.