

Ecclesiastes: Chasing Meaning
Walking Wisely Under the Sun
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel
 Ecclesiastes 4-5

“How Much Land Does a Man Need?”

In 1886, Leo Tolstoy wrote a brilliant short story called “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” In it, a Russian peasant named Pahom criticizes the Russians who live in town for being overly ambitious and materialistic. He says the only thing he really needs is more land, and that, if he had enough land, he wouldn’t fear the devil himself. This combination of self-righteousness, judgmentalism and covetousness is too tempting for the devil himself to resist, and he overhears Pahom’s boasting and decides to destroy him by giving him what he most desires, more land. Bit-by-bit, Pahom accumulates more land and more wealth, but he’s not happy and he has fewer friends than ever, but he still thinks the solution is more land. Finally, he makes a deal with a tribe that holds vast lands. They will give him all the land he can walk around and mark out in a single day – from sunrise to sunset – for one flat price of 1,000 rubles. Pahom can’t believe his good fortune, as he sets out early in the morning with a shovel in hand to mark the boundary of his new land. But he is more ambitious than he can handle. He must return to the spot where he started by sunset, and as the sun begins to set, he is far from the spot. Realizing his error, he starts running back to the starting spot, but he’s been out walking in the sun all day and the long run back is too much for his heart. He collapses and dies, just a few feet from his destination. The tribe digs him a grave and buries him. How much land does a man need? About 6 feet, head to toe.

This great story has a definite Ecclesiastes flavor to it. The story resonates both with Solomon’s musings from 1,000 BC and with our culture here in America in 2019 because, in the end, people do not change, and there is nothing new under the sun. In America today, we might ask, “How much stuff do we really need?” American homes are bigger on average than they’ve ever been, and yet every suburban community needs massive storage facilities to hold all the stuff we can’t fit into our big homes. And while the economy has been growing tremendously and unemployment is at historic lows and the standard of living in America keeps rising, we suffer from more anxiety and depression, and we’re more convinced than ever that America is on the wrong track as epidemics like the opioid crisis and skyrocketing suicide rates plague all classes of Americans. The answer, of course, is that land and stuff can never satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. We are not just material beings hard-wired for accumulation and consumption; we were made for more.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon wants us to see the vaporous nature of life in this world, life under the sun, so we will stop grasping at life, either to find deep significance and satisfaction in the things of this world or to try to understand or control the things of this world. Whenever we try to find satisfaction or seek to understand or control life in this world, we are striving after wind, an exercise in exhausting futility. However, as we saw last week, if we will stop chasing, stop grasping, and live with more gratitude and less entitlement, we will see many better blessings to enjoy in our brief lives under the sun – hard work, joy, marriage, family, good food and drink, and even the blessings that humility and mourning can bring us in helping us see things rightly – the blessing of perspective.

So, how should we live in order to avoid the common trap of striving after wind? What does it look like to walk wisely under the sun, enjoying the better blessings while keeping things in perspective? Well, Solomon explores many areas of life and shows us two basic ways of approaching life in all of these different areas. This is a

common feature of wisdom literature, something Bible scholars sometimes refer to as “two ways” teachings, and the Book of Proverbs is full of them. Much of Ecclesiastes contains these exact kinds of Proverbs – especially in chapters 7, 10 & 11 – but much of Ecclesiastes presents this “two ways” type of teaching very differently, through real-life observations and not proverbs. In other words, Solomon is telling us what he has seen in the world, giving us teaching that is more descriptive than didactic.

So, I know some of you are probably nervous at this point, because you can see the outline in the bulletin, and you see 8 points in the sermon outline, and I haven’t even started in on Point #1 yet, and you might be wondering if this is finally the Sunday when I will preach the 3-hour sermon you suspect I’m quite capable of preaching. Well, relax. We’re just going to drop in very briefly on each of these 8 aspects of life, and there’s really just one central point, one thread of truth that we will seek to weave in and out of these arenas of life: In the words of Proverbs 14:12, the point is this: *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”*

If you look around the world and observe people living life, you will see a way to live that seems perfectly normal, prevalent, and natural, and if you look closely, you’ll see that this way ends in death. So, if we want life, if we want to walk wisely, we will need to walk differently, and Solomon the Preacher will help us, if we listen closely.

A. Wisdom and Justice, 4:1-3

The first place we visit in chapter 4 is the courtroom, which should be the place of justice. But what does he see there? Oppression and injustice –

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. – 4:1-3. ESV

This follows what Solomon had already observed in 3:16: *“Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.”*

This world is a place of oppression, and the oppressors have power on their side. If we are going to walk wisely, we cannot be blind to this truth and we cannot be unmoved by it, either. We can’t just shrug it off, saying, “Oh, well, that’s just the way it is.” Solomon is deeply troubled in his soul by the injustice and oppression he sees. Yet nowhere in Ecclesiastes do we see any utopian schemes or dreams to try to create the classless society or expect perfect justice in this world.

The natural human reaction to injustice and oppression is either callous, selfish indifference (“Not my problem.” “Nothing I can do about it.”) or else a belief that it can be completely fixed through social engineering or political solutions. Yet neither of these are Solomon’s path for walking wisely. He’s the king and he knows he can’t fix the injustice in the land, but he’s far from callous or indifferent. Does that seem like a tense and potentially painful way to walk – to care deeply for the oppressed, even while you know that oppression and injustice cannot be eliminated in this life? It is, but it is also wisdom.

We’ll talk later about what we can do, because that has to do with our relationships, our work and our money.

B. Wisdom and Work, 4:4-8

Next, Solomon takes us to look at the workplace. We remember that hard work is a blessing, but our sinful human nature often twists it into something else entirely:

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. – Ecclesiastes 4:4-8, ESV

"All toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor" - "Keeping up with the Joneses" was not invented by Americans as part of the American dream. And yet the answer is not laziness - "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh" is a picture of the foolish sluggard, a familiar figure from Proverbs. Rather, the key is moderation with perspective and a more balanced approach to work and life - "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind." But, again, it's very natural to be either an envy-driven, ladder-climbing workaholic or a lazy sluggard. What's not natural - and what's far better - is to work very hard in moderation with thanksgiving and to enjoy peace, perspective and balance in life.

C. Wisdom and Relationships, 4:7-12

Thinking about the man who works so hard to gain more and more and yet has no one to share it with leads Solomon to a contemplation of relationships -

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, ESV)

This is a common passage to read at weddings. In fact, I'm planning to read and speak on this passage in a few weeks at Ryan and Jenna's wedding. This is appropriate because great marriages are built on the strength of a great friendship, and the best marriages are marriages between best friends. But this passage applies to more than just marriage. It is about the value of close friendship and how much more valuable a true friend is than great riches. Friends can work hard together and earn a better return for their labor. They can help each other if one of them falls down. Roads in ancient Israel were treacherous in more ways than one, as Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan reminds us - sometimes men walking alone would trip and stumble and then be jumped by thieves who would beat them and leave them for dead. Better to be walking with a good friend.

All of these physical realities have parallels for our spiritual lives, of course. We can profit spiritually by walking with a prayer partner or studying the Bible together with a friend or in a small group. We can help each other if we stumble and fall, as Galatians 6:1 says, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." (ESV) These truths are why being in a church community

with good spiritual friendships is so valuable. Because husbands and wives do have each other, but we need others, too, don't we?

And then, of course, the best friendships are strongest when God is in the center, and I do think that's a valid way to understand this "three-fold cord" - two very good friends who are committed to having God in the center of their friendship.

D. Wisdom and Leadership, 4:13-16

From the courthouse and the workplace and the world of friendship, Solomon now takes us to look at leadership:

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16, ESV)

Good leaders are those who are willing to really take advice – not just surround themselves with “yes men” who do whatever the leader asks, but a real openness to listening to advice and input from others.

Solomon also wants us to see that being born to privilege and position is no guarantee of either wisdom or success. And yet Ecclesiastes is never simplistic; it is relentlessly realistic, and so while we might expect a happier-ever-after ending for this poor and wise youth, the realities of life under the sun are always more complex and usually more dark than that. So, we can't fall into the trap of thinking that if we're wise and willing to listen to advice, we'll be successful and praised and remembered. That's striving after the wind.

The goal of leading well should be to lead well, to be a blessing to those we lead and to serve their interests, not our reputation or lasting fame. Refusing to take advice and desiring to be remembered are just two different kinds of selfish pride, and selfish pride is very natural, but is also very antithetical to wise leadership.

E. Wisdom and Worship, 5:1-7

What's natural in worship is to draw near to God in order to speak to God – to tell Him what we think or what we want or what we're going to do. For example, surveys of spirituality consistently show that far more people pray regularly than read their Bibles. A Barna survey showed that 79% of Americans pray somewhat regularly, while only 32% of church-going Protestants read the Bible personally daily. Another 27% read it personally around one or two times per week. So, that's about 60% of church-goers who read the Bible outside of church on a regular basis. 9 out of 10 American households have a Bible, but 1/3 of all Americans never read the Bible on their own, and less than a quarter of all Americans read the Bible regularly.

If this is the natural approach to God – to speak, rather than to listen, what is the wiser way to walk?

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ²Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. ³For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶ Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, ESV)

In the 1990's, the Promise Keepers movement swept across America, with stadiums full of men making promises to love God and their wives more faithfully. Now, the Promise Keepers had good intentions and I do think the movement was used by God to do some good in the lives of many men, but the truth is that God is the only real Promise Keeper. He keeps His promises, and the hope of our salvation is in what He has done, what He is doing, and what He will do to save us.

We should not be so quick to make pledges, promises, vows and take solemn oaths before God. We should be much quicker to hear Him speak, to worship Him in holy fear and humble reverence. This is not natural to us. We tend to think even God is most concerned with what we think and what we want to do. It's a self-centered approach even to our worship, and it's toxic to real life, which is grounded in the fear of the Lord.

F. Wisdom and Government, 5:8-9

From worship, Solomon takes us to see government in action:

⁸ If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. ⁹ But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields. (Ecclesiastes 5:8-9, ESV)

Just as Americans didn't invent "keeping up with the Joneses," so we didn't invent multi-layered government bureaucracy either. Such governments are ineffective and inefficient and foster the oppression of the poor because the people in them tend to be self-focused, worried more about their own jobs and position in the bureaucracy than about the people they're called to serve. Again, this is normal, but wrong and unwise. What is better? Government focused on the economic development of the people, on the prosperity and well-being of those the government is called to serve, not on the government itself.

G. Wisdom and Wealth, 5:10-20 & 11:1-6

But it's too easy to take jabs at government bureaucracy. That's low-hanging fruit, so Solomon calls out attention back closer to home, to how we think about and use our money:

¹⁰ He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. ¹¹ When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? ¹² Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

¹³ There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, ¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. ¹⁵ As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. ¹⁶ This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him

who toils for the wind? ¹⁷ Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. (Ecclesiastes 5:10-17, ESV)

So, how should we think about our money? Well, later in chapter 11, Solomon will call us to a radical generosity and generous investing:

*Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.*

² *Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.*

³ *If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*

⁴ *He who observes the wind will not sow,
and he who regards the clouds will not reap.*

⁵ *As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*

⁶ *In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, ESV)*

Again, it's the most natural thing in the world for us to want to keep our money for ourselves and put it to work in getting more money for us, which we can keep for ourselves. But selfishness will never satisfy; it will only leave us empty. Trying to predict and control everything so as to maximize profit from our investments and to accumulate the most wealth for ourselves will only lead to emptiness, frustration and even despair. Instead, we should give freely and generously – “cast our bread upon the waters”

H. Wisdom and Moderation, 7:15-18

It's not only generosity but moderation that we need to exercise, and not just in terms of our money and wealth, but even in wisdom and righteousness –

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. ¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. (Ecclesiastes 7:15-18, ESV)

This is surely strange advice from a preacher. Last week, it was “Life is too short to take too seriously, so make sure you have fun and enjoy the better blessings of life,” and now this week, it's “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.” I thought righteousness and wisdom were two things we could never have enough of. But only God is perfectly wise and perfectly righteous, and the desire to pursue righteousness and wisdom excessively is also another form of selfishness or self-centeredness – I want to be wise to show how wise I am. I

want to be righteous and show that I am righteous. This attitude is also toxic. It's better to remember 7:20: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."

Only if a man loses His life . . .

Well, we've run quickly through just about every area of life, from the courthouse to the workplace, from marriage and friendship to our bank accounts and our personal morality. The common theme that we've seen in all of these areas is that the normal, natural way to live is really a self-centered way of life. Whether we're protecting ourselves, advancing ourselves, accumulative wealth for ourselves, or trying to prove ourselves to be wise and righteous, we are all naturally prone to live life as if it is a movie starring ME.

But what did Jesus say? In Luke 17:32-33, He said, "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it." Remember Lot's wife. She couldn't let go of the things of the world, even when she knew that those things offended God and were being judged by Him. Instead, Jesus calls us to more, to real life. He offers us a better life, a life of real freedom, freedom from the toxic frustration and fruitlessness of living for ourselves and the freedom and joy of losing our life under the sun to find real life in Him, in the Son of God.

In John 12:24-26, Jesus says this truth a little differently:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. (ESV)

Will we fall into earth and die? Die to self and selfishness? Realistically, we only will if we truly believe in the power of resurrection. More on that next week . . .