

Lessons from Ecclesiastes

I. Introduction

A. In Ecclesiastes, the question is asked: "What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). The key phrase is "under the sun."

1. What profit is there in life when viewed from an earthly perspective?
2. What value is there in our labor when we fail to consider God's will in our lives? We have seen the answer given by the Preacher: "All is vanity" (1:2, 14).

B. How did he reach this conclusion? It was based upon personal experience (1:1-2:26) and personal observation (3:1-6:12).

C. Our previous lessons examined the experiences of the Preacher. Now we begin to note his observations, in which he also shares his wisdom for living "under the sun." His conclusion that life "under the sun" was vanity was partly reached by observing.

II. The inexplicable purpose of God

A. All things serve God's divine purpose.

1. "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" (3:1-8).
2. "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11a).
3. "Whatever God does, it shall be forever" (3:14, 15).

B. Man is unable to discover God's purpose.

1. God has put it in man to search out this purpose (3:9-11a).
2. But "no one can find out the work that God has done" (3:11b).

C. Why does God act this way?

1. "God does it, that men should fear before Him" (3:14c).
2. He wants man to reverence God and therefore seek to please Him (Acts 17:26, 27). God has made man an inquisitive creature. He has also made life such that we are always seeking something better or looking for a purpose. Hopefully, we will keep seeking until we find Him!

D. The Preacher's conclusion.

1. There is nothing better than to "rejoice and do good" (3:12) and "eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor" (3:13a).
2. Yet the ability to do so is "the gift of God" (3:13b). Therefore any effort to live without God can only be vanity, for we will find His purposes inexplicable.

III. The injustice and oppression of men

A. What the Preacher saw.

1. Wickedness in the place of justice (3:16)
2. Power on the side of the oppressor, with no comfort for the oppressed (4:1)

3. This prompted him to think the dead were better than the living; even better were those who had never lived (4:2, 3).

B. What the Preacher reasoned in his heart

1. God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17a).
2. God can use injustice and wickedness in carrying out His purpose (3:17b) (e.g., just as He used Assyria and Babylon to discipline Israel).
3. God allows injustice to test the sons of men (3:18-21).

C. What the Preacher concluded.

1. Once again, he understands the value of rejoicing in one's own works (3:22a).
2. This is what God allots him, not what may happen on earth after he is gone (3:22b). In the remaining part of this section (3:1-4:16), we find the Preacher making various comments, which may be summarized as follows:

IV. The vanity of skilful and selfish work

A. It can breed envy in others.

1. He saw how skilful work can cause one to be envied by one's neighbour (4:4).
2. While it is foolish to fold one's hands and do nothing, acquiring too much is not worth the effort, for it really does not satisfy (4:5, 6).
3. What is best is to have little with quietness and contentment (Prov. 15:16, 17).

B. If one is all alone:

1. The Preacher saw one with no companion, neither son nor brother (Eccl. 4:7, 8).
 - a. He was one who is never satisfied; indeed, he can't be (5:10).
 - b. He doesn't think for whom he is labouring (2:18, 19).
2. It is much better to have friends (4:9-12) who can help each other in their labor; who can help each other when they fall, who can help each other withstand forces of opposition.

C. Popularity is so fleeting.

1. It is better to be a poor and wise youth than an old foolish king (4:13).
2. Despite rising from poverty and prison to become king, he will find that the people will eventually prefer another much younger than him (4:14-16).

V. Conclusion

A. The Preacher's observations about the vanity of life, along with wisdom for living "under the sun," continue in succeeding chapters.

B. But we have seen in this study:

1. Why he reached his conclusions about the vanity of life
2. The inexplicable purposes of God

3. The injustice and oppression of men and the vanity of skillful and selfish toil d. What wisdom he offers for living “under the sun”

C. As Christians today, we may be perplexed at times concerning the workings of God.

1. But we have the assurance that all things work for good for them who love God and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

2. We have the family of God to help us in our labor and in time of need (1 Thess. 5:11).

There is no greater friend than the One who is the ultimate end of all God’s purposes in this world: Jesus Christ! (cf. Eph. 1:9, 10). Through Him we can “obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. 4:15-16).

Are you a friend of Jesus? Remember then what He said: “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:14). Let Jesus be your friend by obeying His will (Matt. 28:19, 20).