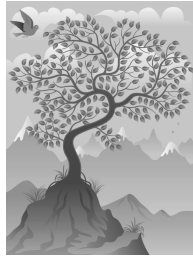


THE FOUR SEASONS



REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-10

¹ The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. ⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. ⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. ⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

¹For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.



THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes is about making decisions in life. Some lead to narcissism and vanity for people and for groups of people. Other decisions lead to vitality and immortality. The book of Ecclesiastes is part four of the Wisdom Literature of the Holy Scriptures, and it is about the decisions people make and what they lead them to. It gives us a lot to talk about.

DECISIONS

In Jackson, Mississippi's zoo, there used to be benches which, until the Freedom Rides of the early 1960's, had been used by whites only.

Then, one day, a few Negroes sat down on one of these benches and they were arrested. City officials realized that arresting the blacks would not solve the "whites only" problem. They considered setting up benches marked "colored" and "whites only," but concluded that wouldn't be a solution either in light of the Rides.

Their decision was simply to remove all benches. Thereafter, no humans, either white or colored, could sit down in the zoo.

The only living things who could sit in the city zoo were the animals.

James Peck, *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*

Given a choice, the city officials fixed the wrong problem. Later, however, Civil Rights legislation would correct their error.

Ecclesiastes is about decisions that lead to life or frustration. It would not be difficult for most of us to list defining decisions in our own lives. One of its recurring themes is the seasons of life.

THE HEART IN AUTUMN

A favorite book of mine entitled, "*Listen to Love - Reflections on Seasons of the Year*" (Regina Press) has meditations for each season, but none more poignant than the season we are just entering, the season of autumn.

Here is a preface to "*The Heart in Autumn*," and it will lead us into the book of Ecclesiastes.

Autumn brings choices and decisions. It is a time for the heart to mold its convictions and to render its judgments. It is a time for purpose and commitment, for choosing one's path, and for discovering one's direction. Sometimes merely to ask is to decide. Sometimes a simple, "yes" can change the course of a lifetime.

The heart in autumn is unwilling to settle either for comfort or for violence, since it has grown into responsibility. In autumn the heart is happy to use its powers, to exercise its strength.

In autumn the heart must come face to face with life's predicaments, and enlarges its concerns to those of all people, not just the selected. In autumn, the heart rages against the dying of the light, and recognizes that the quality in one's life is most important, not merely the number of years. It is the time of year that we see meaning beyond death.

Autumn is the season of love tested and tried, of comforts sought and shared. It is the season of a sweetness that can never be taken away. In this season, the heart knows that nothing can separate it from the love of God.

In autumn, the heart is for choosing

A MELANCHOLY BOOK?

I think the book of Ecclesiastes is about this "autumn way of thinking" in the lives of the Hebrews. It has been called a "melancholy" book. Is there meaning to life, or is it all human vanity? Does it matter if we build or simply decay as the body begins to die from the first day that it is born?

What is wealth?

Why should we work?

And will we, one day, all vanish without a trace?

This is not a book that Christians should ignore. As with all Old Testament Scripture, Paul says it was written for our learning (Romans 15:4) and admonition (1Corinthians 10:11). It is profitable for reproof and correction (2Timothy 3: 16-17).

Ecclesiastes has special relevance today in our materialistic society as it points out the vanity of many earthly pursuits. It contains lessons especially for the young who have so much to lose should they make the wrong choices early in life.

TITLE AND AUTHOR

In the Hebrew Bible, the book title Ecclesiastes can be translated "preacher" (cf. 1:1). The term suggests one who speaks before an assembly. The word is derived from "ekklesia," meaning "assembly."

Jewish and early Christian traditions attribute the book to Solomon. The author identifies himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). He also refers to himself as "the Preacher" (1:1, 2:12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). Internal evidences point to Solomon. Note the references to:

* His wisdom - 1:16; cf. 1Kings 3:12

* His building activities - 2:4-6; cf. 1Kings 7:1-12

* His wealth - 2:7-9; cf. 2Chronicles 9:13-28

* His activities after writing this book - 12:9-10; cf. 1Kings 4:30-34

Like most of the books of the Bible some raise questions about its authorship. But I don't think there is enough evidence to reject the traditional view of Solomon as the author. If Solomon is indeed the author, then the date the book was written would be around 945 B.C.

PURPOSE FOR WRITING:

The Preacher spoke the questions that many people had asked: "What profit has a person from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?" (1:3).

In other words, what purpose is there for living? What is the meaning of life? Having been blessed with great material resources and wisdom, the Preacher was able to explore all avenues in his search. He writes to share with us the results of his own investigation, and to offer observations and words of counsel gleaned from his search.

There are two main messages. The first is stated in the Prologue, but the second requires some digging.

"All is vanity." (1:2) This theme is repeated by the Preacher time and again, and this gives structure to the book. Vanity is emptiness or narcissism, or arrogance.

The vanity of pleasure - 2:1

The vanity of industry (labor) - 2:11, 22-23; 4:4

The vanity of human wisdom - 2:15

The vanity of all life - 2:17

The vanity of leaving an inheritance - 2:18-21

*Throughout his words of counsel and wisdom:

The vanity of earthly existence - 3:19-21

The vanity of acquiring riches over family - 4:7-8

The vanity of political popularity - 4:16

The vanity of many dreams and many words - 5:7

The vanity of loving abundance - 5:10

The vanity of wealth without the gift of God to enjoy it - 6:2

The vanity of wandering desire - 6:9

The vanity of foolish laughter - 7:6

The vanity of injustice in this life - 8:14

The vanity of the days of darkness - 11:8

The vanity of childhood and youth - 11:10

The word vanity occurs thirty-five times in twenty-nine verses, and it means uselessness.

UNDER THE SUN

But a key phrase leads us to the true meaning. "Under the sun" is found twenty-nine times in twenty-seven verses. It suggests that this message of vanity is true when one looks at life purely from an earthly perspective. The opposite of vanity is humility. Leave God and the afterlife out of the equation, and life is truly vanity! So living for God must be part of the meaning of life. And I think that is why it is in the Bible. Spiritual life is not vanity.

This is the message the Preacher would leave with the young (cf. 11:9-12:1), and is stated in his final words: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." (12:13)

NOT CONTENT - MODERN

In the season of autumn humans are not content with vanity and meaninglessness.

So I have a modern author reflecting upon this season of spiritual search in his own life.

SUFFERING MOVES HUMANS TO ACT

By Erich Fromm

...suffering moves a person to act against his oppressors, to seek the end of the oppression, although we cannot yet seek a freedom of which we know nothing.

If humans lose the capacity to suffer, we have also lost the capacity for change.

PROLOG TO THE CHRIST

Ecclesiastes is a book about maturity with a message that we sometimes overlook. That is “the centrality of a spiritual life.”

It is like communion in which we find spiritual meaning in physical food.

In our giving we find meaning beyond our own needs. In our relationships we discover our joy in bringing joy to others.

And here is the lesson above all lessons that this brings me to. This is prolog to thinking like the Christ. Jesus Christ.

**Finding meaning in service.
Finding power in care.
Finding hope beyond culture.**

For me it will always be easier to point to the person of Jesus Christ and say he is the embodiment of hope that leads us out of the follies of our human predicaments.

But Ecclesiastes points out what those follies are: the temptations of abundance, and the temporary nature of popularity.

ENLARGING OUR CONCERNS

This brings us back to this season of autumn in human life in which we come face to face with life’s predicaments, and enlarge our concerns to those of all people, not just the selected.

In autumn, our hearts rage against the dying of the light and the loss of truth.

The quality of our lives grows ever more important in this season, and it is not merely the number of years. Autumn bids us to see meaning beyond death.

Autumn is the season of ultimate responsibility as we resolve to use our powers for good, and our strength for justice.

So part of the strength of Ecclesiastes is not in its answers, but in what it makes us think about in our own lives. For me, it is how much I need the words of Jesus to understand the meaning of the words everyone else is speaking around me, and to remember what is truly important.

To everything there is a season. But this is the season of reflection upon what got us here, and where we are going.

It’s a powerful message.



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