

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 3

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Next, the Preacher takes up wisdom and death in vv. 12-17, then, toil and inheritance in vv. 18-23. First, then wisdom and death.

Wisdom and Death

In v.12 he said, so I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. He again gives us his credentials for this inquiry in the second half of v.12: For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. In other words, my experience is exhaustive enough that no one who succeeds me will be able to go beyond it. I have had the wealth – and leisure – to throw my heart fully into exploring the enigmas of life. No one else will be able to do this as I have done it.

Then, in v.13 we get a surprising statement which could have come straight out of the book of Proverbs. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. Solomon knows this to be true, but it is largely a statement of faith at this point. And it will be immediately called into question. The reason wisdom excels folly is given in v.14: The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. The wise person can see what's going on; his eyes are in his head. The fool's eyes, as Proverbs puts it, are on the ends of the earth. They have come out of his head, and thus he walks in darkness.

This is pretty conventional OT stuff, and it is surprising since Solomon has already told us, in chapter 1, that wisdom brings sorrow and vexation, and that its pursuit is vapor and striving after the wind. And, immediately, this “conventional wisdom” about wisdom, is called into question, in the latter half of v.14: And yet – the “yet” is important – it indicates a tension, one that runs through the whole book, between what Solomon knows to be true and what his experience tells him.

The Solomon of Proverbs believes in a pretty direct relationship between behavior/character and consequences. The wise and righteous are blessed and the wicked are thwarted (as a general pattern, Proverbs is more sophisticated).

Wisdom is almost ALWAYS advantageous in Proverbs, never called into question as it is here. So, in one sense Ecclesiastes is the book of Proverbs put on trial. Where are all these causal connections that Israel believed by faith in Yahweh? The real world often seems to present us with the opposite. The wicked prosper, the wise suffer. This conflict between what we know to be true by faith and what we often experience is why Ecclesiastes is so important. It confronts this painful contradiction (exceptions to the rule) head on.

So, Solomon affirms the superiority of wisdom and immediately adds the qualifier: and yet - I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. The event here, as we will see in a moment, is death. Another of Solomon's grand preoccupations. Verse 15: then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" What real gain is there in wisdom if the wise man and the fool both end up dead? The horizon of death, against which every life is lived, puts a real damper on the alleged advantages of wisdom.

The Preacher concludes, at the end of v.15: And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. This reality of death is as unmanageable as the wind. One could maybe take some comfort in that the wise will be remembered and the fool won't. In fact, Proverbs says just that: the memory of the righteous will be blessed and the memory of the wicked will rot. But, the Solomon here and the Solomon of Proverbs are having a heated discussion.

In chapter 1 he told us that there is no remembrance of the former things. Most men and things are forgotten. And he reiterates that here in v.16: for of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. This situation is an outrage for the Preacher and it creates a threat to a simplistic approach to wisdom. Hyperbole, some are remembered, but if you recall the citation from Thomas Howard last week it a very slim number of the innumerable hordes of us mortals. But, even where there is remembrance... Think about this: Solomon was the wisest and richest man in the ANE. If anyone could expect to be remembered it's him. And we have virtually no archeological evidence that he or any of his great projects ever existed. They are buried in ruins and forgotten. Same with his kingdom, his concubines and his wives.

He has been remembered through the literature in Scripture, so he has exceeded virtually all men, yet virtually all of his personal life and work is lost in the mist. And that's as good as it gets. He exclaims, as if in protest, at the end of v.16: How the wise man dies just like the fool. The same EVENT happens to them both. Death is an event that HAPPENS to us. We don't choose it, it simply overtakes us. And Death is the gorilla in the room for men and women who think they are in control; who think they can leverage life to their advantage. (10M things keeping you alive now) This "happening," this "event" of death appears senseless to the preacher.

Examples of wise men dying as fools abound. I don't know why, but one sticks in my head from about 20 years ago. I was driving to work one morning; and I would listen to the NYC radio stations and they would regularly give the morning traffic reports. You know, a thirty minute delay on this road, forty-five minutes on that one. Well, they had a story of what had happened in the snarled traffic the day before. The traffic was at a standstill on a number of roads, including one road which crossed over the road below it. The upper road had a cement truck on it and a huge block of cement fell off the truck into a car sitting in traffic below, instantly killing the driver. Turns out that the driver was a prominent NYC neurosurgeon. Dead, just like a fool dies. The event of death just HAPPENS to us. So much for the years of medical school and all the good he was going to do in the rest of his life. All of his wisdom and skill died with him. I've never forgotten the story. And it is this "blindness" of death, this disregard of whether a man is wise or a fool; that grieves Solomon. And it should grieve us as well. It is part of the grievous business of life under the sun.

In our culture there are three basic approaches to death. The dominant one seems to be complete denial. Most people live as if it doesn't exist and will never befall them. It's a toxic combination of fear and delusion. The second, is a sort of glorification of it, seen for example in films which glamorize suicide and killing and celebrate the senselessness of it all. The third approach to death is to naturalize it. It's just a simple biological phenomenon, so learn to accept it. This is the George Harrison, all things must pass, approach. Death is like a nap. Denial, glorification, naturalization. Solomon rejects all of these. He refuses to avert his gaze, he refuses to accept it and he refuses to glamorize it. Death is an enemy, a grotesque intruder. Solomon will not come to terms with it. He will not treat as a rather unfortunate sequel to an otherwise nice journey. He's with the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who famously said: do not go gentle into that good night, rage, rage, against the dying of the light. Solomon is protesting death. He will not go gentle into that good night.

And the result is seen in v.17: so I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. I don't think this is an ungodly attitude on Solomon's part. He is not saying he hates life per se. He is saying that the fact that death happens to the wise as well as the fool, with no regard of person, is grievous, or evil to him. Who wouldn't hate life under these conditions? While this cannot be the permanent disposition of a godly person, it is a sentiment we can sympathize with. Remember, God Himself hates death. He is the Lord of life. God was grieved that He made man- after He saw the evil they committed before the flood. So grieved, He even repented of making man. If He can feel that way then so can we. Death is a curse, and it is everywhere Solomon looks, so, from that point of view, he hates life.

He concludes v.17 with the familiar: all is vapor and a striving after wind. Which here means you can't grasp or leverage or control death. Wisdom is no

safeguard against it. So, we have the tension starkly set out: wisdom seems to have some advantages, but in the light of death, the advantages are sharply called into question. And Solomon does not resolve the tension here.

Next, we have toil and inheritance: In v.18 we see that he not only hated life, but he hated all the toil at which he toiled under the sun. Here the specific issue with work is the question of inheritance or succession. This is a basic question of life. All that we do MUST be left behind. Notice the text: seeing that I MUST leave it. You can't take it with you. The night you die, all that you labored for is left for others. A good deal of your wisdom and knowledge, and virtually all your experience, dies with you. But some of it, along with the tangible fruits of your labor, can and must be passed on. And of the person who comes after you, v. 19 asks, who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Who knows? Nobody knows. Someone else is now MASTER over all you toiled for and all you acquired by wisdom. This is also a vaporous situation as we see at the end of v.19. Once you die, you have no control over either your assets or those who inherit them. No gain or leverage. No management or supervision.

Now, we like to think we can leverage this somewhat through wills and legal stipulations, through training and discipling our successors. All good things, but history teaches us the painful lesson that our leverage here is much less than we think. Virtually every Christian ministry from say, a hundred years ago, has either vanished or been theologically corrupted. All the Christian colleges have been ravaged. Harvard, Yale, Notre Dame and dozens more. Sure, we start new ones. But the long-term prospects are not good. Nearly every denomination from the founding era of the US has abandoned the gospel. Virtually every charitable foundation has been subverted from the original aims of those who established it. No amount of paperwork, no amount of choosing immediate successors seems to stem the tide. Solomon's own son was a fool who tore the kingdom in two. The history of Israel after his reign is one long decline.

Einstein, when he was told about the bombing of Hiroshima, was said to have held his head in his hands, and after remaining silent for awhile, he said: The old Chinese are right; you cannot do whatever you want. You can't control what happens to your work. Marx could not control what Stalin did with his work. We do not and cannot control the future. It cannot be grasped. Here's another valuable service Ecclesiastes performs. It allows you to get the despair and disillusionment out now!

This situation about one's successors does just that to Solomon in v.20: so a turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun. This is personal and painful for Solomon. The despair is understandable. There are no motivational office posters that say: Death will occur to all and you will have no control over the fruits of your labor, so strive for customer excellence today!

Verse 21 makes the situation a bit more explicit: sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. Solomon is not being stingy or peevish here. The idea seems to be that the person not only did not toil for it, but didn't deserve the inheritance. But this verse adds another dimension to the vanity. Men generally don't manage well what they did not work for (e.g., lottery winners). And that is a problem which afflicts all forms of inheritance and succession.

Notice also, that this is something that happens, Solomon says "sometimes." He's aware that the person who inherits one's labor MAY be wise and judicious. But that is not the point. The point is you have NO control over it. They may be wise at the time of your death and a fool three years later. Even if your immediate successor turns out to be a stellar Christian, what about their successor and the one after that? Your control goes from almost zero to zero within a few generations.

We should note something else. This inheritance problem is particularly acute for the likes of Solomon. For those who toil with wisdom and knowledge and skill, as he describes it. Inheritance is an issue for successful people. The small businessman who fails doesn't have the problem – he has no assets. The very success envisioned here accentuates the vapor, the lack of control. And successful people like control – that's how they became successful.

So, at the end of v.21 Solomon concludes: this is also vanity and a great evil. The vapor is not simply unmanageable, it's evil. It's part of the evil business God has afflicted the sons of man with. Not until we receive our inheritance as sons and daughters in Christ will we possess a secure future for our labors. Until then, the future doesn't exist, and if it doesn't exist, you can't control it.

In v. 22 the Preacher asks: what has a man from all the toil and *striving of heart* with which he toils beneath the sun? This is the driving question: what is left over? What gain is there? Verse 23 gives us the answer. All his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. Work in this world easily becomes an obsession, taking not just your days, but your nights, and your sleep. It is difficult enough for anyone in this evil business, but it saps the very life out of those who seek to grasp it and control it. They find at the end of v.23, no surprise here, that labor itself is vapor.

So, here's what we know. Wisdom should be better than folly, but death seems to turn the whole spectacle into vapor and causes Solomon to hate life. Toil is problematic because the future, and thus the question of inheritance, also can't be grasped.

Practical applications: First, this book is to make you a person who loosens up their grip on life, on your work, on other people, on your plans, on the future. Stop

grasping and striving to control what you cannot control. This will ease the natural despair and hatred that life can breed.

Second, we must say that we are all children who have forfeited our inheritance rights. It is this that has made death our lot, and the future so fragile and ungraspable. Yet, Christ has come to destroy our death AND to secure our inheritance. A glorious inheritance with all the saints in everlasting light. He gives us His Spirit, His breath, His vapor, as the One who grasps the ungraspable. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is the GAURANTEE of our inheritance. You want a GUARANTEE that transcends death and secures the future? It is the Spirit of Christ. He is the mystery of the church's continuity in time, he unites us to Christ, he binds us to all the saints past and present, He will quicken us in our graves, He is the pledge of our immortality, the GUARANTEE of our inheritance.

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