

Ecclesiastes
"Vanity Squared" - 1:1-16

I. Introduction

- A. The circle of life - Lion King movie, song burned this concept into the brains of so many of us. But is it true? Many in our world believe so.
- B. Solomon, in the first chapter of the book we will look at over the next three months, gives us his perspective of what life is worth. Let's check it out.

II. Vanity Squared - vv 1-16

A. Solomon's **introduction** - vv. 1-3.

- 1. The title v. 1 The author identified himself by his titles (cf. Prov. 1:1).
 - a) These titles point to Solomon more than to any other person as the author. Later he claimed divine authority for this book (12:1).
 - b) The term "Preacher" (Heb. qohelet, NIV "Teacher") refers to a wise sage who taught the Israelites God's will.
- 2. The theme v. 2
 - a) Sol. puts the "key" to Ecc. at the front door: "*Vanity of vanities... all is vanity.*" Just in case we miss it, he puts this same key at the back door (12:8).
 - (1) "Vanity" (*hebel*) ("meaningless") means lacking real substance, value, permanence, worth, or significance. 38 times in Ecc., & only 35 times elsewhere in the OT. 3 of these uses describe idols. "Vapor," "breath-like," ephemeral," "enigmatic," or even "smoke" = the idea.
 - (a) One commentator sees it standing for human inability to grasp the meaning of God's way rather than an ultimate emptiness in life.
 - (b) *Hebel* speaks of human limitation & frustration caused by the vast gap between God's knowledge and power vs. our ignorance.
 - b) This (vanity²) is Solomon's "big idea." It is the point he supports, proves, and applies to his and our lives in the chapters that follow.
 - 3. The thought - v 3
 - a) Vanity of work. Rather than saying, "*All work is vanity,*" he asks a rhetorical question that expects a negative response. He uses this device often.
 - (1) "Advantage" (Heb. *yitron*) refers to what remains in the sense of a net profit. This Hebrew word occurs nowhere else in the OT.
 - (2) Solomon was not saying there is nothing good about work or that it is worse than being unemployed. He means humanity's work apart from God yields only a short term (financial, prestige, personal satisfaction) profit, but nothing long-term or eternal.

B. Solomon's **perspective** - vv 4-8

- a) Solomon now becomes a scientist & examines the "circle of life" around him: earth, sun, wind, & water. He observes generations of people come & go while nature remained pretty much the same. He saw "change" all around, yet in the end nothing really changed. Boring! From his POV.
- b) So he asks, "Is life worth living?" and presents four pieces of evidence to prove - from his perspective - nothing really changes.
 - (1) The **earth** (v. 4).
 - (a) From his POV, nothing seems more permanent than the planet on which we live. Mankind seems transient as death always claims us.
 - (b) Solomon introduces a topic frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes: the shortness of life and the certainty of death.
 - (2) The **sun** (v. 5).
 - (a) He moves from the earthly cycle of birth and death to the heavenly cycle of day and night.
 - (b) "As certain as night follows day!" - he pictures the sun rising in the east and "panting" (literal translation) its way across the sky.
 - (c) What does the sun accomplish? From Solomon's POV - one day is like the one before and the heavens always remain the same.
 - (3) The **wind** (v. 6).
 - (a) From the east-west movement of the sun, he turns to the invisible north-south movement of the wind. He isn't lecturing on the physics of the wind, but is saying the wind is in constant motion, following "circuits" mankind can't fully understand or chart.
 - (b) Solomon's POV: constant changing direction of the wind doesn't change it's still wind! We hear, feel & see what it does, but it doesn't change its cycles or circuits. Not even a worldwide pandemic can make it change! Mankind comes & goes but he wind goes on forever.
 - (4) The **sea** (v. 7).
 - (a) Solomon describes the "water cycle" that helps sustain life on our planet.
 - i) At any given time, 97% of all the water on earth is in the oceans, and only .0001 % is in the atmosphere, for rain. (10 days of rain).
 - ii) The sun and the wind makes possible the evaporation and movement of moisture. This keeps the water "circulating." But the sea never changes! The rivers and rains pour water into the seas, but the seas remain the same from his POV.
 - (b) So, whether we look at the earth, the heavens, the winds, or the waters, he concludes nature doesn't change. There is motion but not promotion. This is why he cites the monotony of life as his first argument to prove life is not worth living. Vanity squared!
 - (5) The Real Real Solomon does not talk about, but is still really there.
 - (a) All of this is true...if you look at life "under the sun" **and leave God out of the picture**.
 - i) The world = a uniform, predictable, & unchangeable closed system, where there are no answers to prayer and no miracles.
 - ii) Even if there is a God in this world, He can't act on our behalf because He is limited by the "laws of nature" that cannot be suspended. Christians would have to cancel the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus because it's against the rules!
 - iii) God did "break into" nature and if you, by faith, receive Jesus Christ as your Savior (Rom. 10:9-10) God becomes your Heavenly Father and you no longer need to live in the world's "closed system" of endless, monotonous cycles - from the Bible's POV.
 - iv) Christians live in this world as **pilgrims**, not **prisoners**. We should be **joyful & confident** no matter the circumstances!

C. Solomon's first observation = Nothing Is **New** - vv. 8-11.

1. If nothing changes, it's reasonable to conclude nothing - from Solomon's perspective - is new. This "logical conclusion" would startle scientists today. We are surrounded by a multitude of marvels that **we** say are important. Next, Solomon becomes more of a historian. Let's follow his reasoning.
 - a) First, mankind continually wants something new (v. 8).
 - (1) Because everything in this world ultimately brings weariness, mankind longs for something to distract or deliver them.
 - (2) We are like the Athenians in Paul's day, spending their time "...either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21).
 - (3) But even while seeing or hearing these "new things," we are still dissatisfied with life and will do almost anything to find some escape.
 - b) Second, the world in which we live provides nothing new (vv. 9-10).
 - (1) A long-time pastor said, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new."
 - (a) "New" is just a rearrangement of something old. Mankind can't "create" anything new because we are the created, not the Creator.
 - (b) Thomas Edison once said his inventions were only "*bringing out nature's secrets and applying them for the happiness of mankind*."
 - (2) **Only God** can create new things, and he begins by making sinners "new creatures" when they trust Jesus to save them (Rom. 10:9-10).
 - c) Third, there is a reason why mankind believes things are new (v. 11).
 - (1) We have really, really bad historical memories so we constantly repeat ourselves. "*Anyone who ignores history is doomed to repeat it*."
 - (2) He wrote about basic principles of life not methods. "*Methods are many, principles are few. Methods always change, principles never do.*"
 - (a) Many think they see something new, but those experiences are limited or their vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things.
 - (b) The conclusion is that because something is recent, mankind thinks it is new mistaking novelty for originality.

D. Solomon's second observation = Nothing Is **Understood** - vv. 12-18.

1. Solomon becomes a philosopher as he tells us how he went about searching for answers.
 - a) As the "all-wise" king of Israel, he had the resources necessary for "experimenting" with different solutions to see what made life worth living.
 - b) He experimented with physical pleasures, accomplishing great & costly works, & accumulating great wealth. He discovered it was vanity squared!
2. Before launching into his experiments, Solomon tries to think the matter through - using his unique God-given wisdom.
 - a) He focused all his mind to get to the root of it ("seek") and explore it from all sides ("search"). Some of his tentative conclusions are in vv 13-18:
 - (1) Life is tough, but in the end it is the gift of God (v. 13).
 - (a) He described life as a "trail" that fatigues you until you die.
 - i) When God first gave life to man, the world had not been cursed because of sin. Since the fall of man (Gen. 3), "the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs" (Rom. 8:22); this is one reason why life is so difficult. And yet...
 - ii) One day, when the Lord returns, creation will be delivered from this bondage once and for all!
 - (b) How should we respond? Believers are created in the image of God and saved by the grace of God. I need to remember that one day, I will be like Jesus; for that reason, I should sing God's praises, not complain about my situation, just like His creation will on that day.
 - (2) Life doesn't get easier if you try to run away from it (v. 14).
 - (a) All works done "under the sun" never truly satisfy the heart. They are but "vanity and grasping for the wind." Many people workaholic are figuratively running here and there from reality & living on worldly substitutes. One day the bubble of illusion will burst.
 - (b) We make life harder when we try to escape it. Instead of running away from life, we should run to God & let Him make life worth living.
 - (c) The ultimate door of escape is suicide (48K last year). Solomon has something to say about mankind's desire for death as an escape.
 - (3) Not everything can be changed (v. 15).
 - (a) He may have quoted a popular saying to make this point. If we spend all our time and energy trying to straighten things out, we'll have nothing left to live our lives with! If we try to spend what we don't have, we'll end up in moral or monetary bankruptcy.
 - i) Only God can straighten out what's twisted & supply what's lacking. He won't change the past, but He will change its effects on us.
 - ii) For the sinner, the past is a heavy anchor dragging them down. For the child of God, it becomes a rudder that guides us forward.
 - iii) Jesus often straightened out the twisted & provided what was lacking. Mankind can never do this in their own wisdom or power.
 - (b) Solomon looks at these problems from a vantage point "under the sun." That's why they seemed so insoluble to him.
 - (4) Wisdom and experience will not solve every problem (vv. 16-18).
 - (a) Those who go through life living on explanations will always be unhappy for at least two reasons.
 - i) First, this side of heaven, there are no explanations for some things, and God is not obligated to explain them to us anyway.
 - ii) Second, God ordained His people live by promises, not explanations, by faith not sight. See John 20:29, "*Blessed are they...*"

III. Conclusions.

- A. If anybody was equipped to solve the problems of life Solomon was that person.
 1. He was the wisest of men. People came from all over to hear his wisdom. His wealth was beyond measure, he could do anything.
 2. Instead, he experienced "madness and folly" (opposite of wisdom) in his quest for the right answers. His wisdom added to his frustrations. Scientist: the world = closed system; nothing is changed. Historian: life = closed book, nothing is new. Philosopher: life = deep problem, nothing understood.
- B. Jesus is *the power and wisdom of God* (1 Cor. 1:24). He has miraculously broken into our stream of history to bring new life to all who trust Him as Savior. If you are "living in circles this morning," or frustrated by "Vanity²" you don't need the Lion King, you need the King of Kings. Let's pray.