

Place: Lurgan Baptist 28:10:2014

" A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE,"

22. THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

An old European fable tells of the downfall of a spider. One day it descended on a single thread from a barn's lofty rafters and alighted near the corner of a window. From there it wove its web. This corner of the barn was very busy with insects and soon the spider waxed fat and prosperous. One day in his prosperity as he surveyed his web he noticed the strand that reached up into the unseen. He had forgotten its significance and thinking it a stray thread, he snapped it. *Instantly, his whole world collapsed around him.* My Solomon had a strand that connected him to heaven. Solomon had a relationship with the Lord, but somewhere in life he got so fat, so interested in the things of this life that he cut the living link between himself and God.

Is this where you are this ? Once you walked close with the Lord, but then you got materially fat, felt you could without the Lord and this your cry is,

where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord." Now you will recognize that the words of Ecclesiastes are the words of King Solomon the son of the great king David. Do you see how the book begins ? (1:1) I mean who else could have described himself as " *the son of David king in Jerusalem.*" Here we have the

words of a man who because of his privileged position has sampled all that life has to offer. But he is now king and carries the responsibility of ruling others. He also takes upon himself the responsibility of teaching them and calls himself " *the preacher* " (1:1) That's what the Greek term Ecclesiastes means. It can be translated "*preacher*," or "*philosopher*" or "*lecturer*" Some feel the best translation is "*speaker*" I mean what do you call the) person who presides over the debates in the House of Commons ? **The speaker.** So this book is written in the style of an old man presiding over a debate, a debate that is going on in his own mind. Like every good speaker, he allows the pros and cons to be given equal opportunity. So the motion that life is not worth living is followed by a motion proclaiming that it is. You see, according to Jewish tradition, Solomon wrote the *Song of Solomon* in his early years, expressing a young man's love. He wrote the book of *Proverbs* during his middle age years revealing a mature wisdom.

But he wrote the book of *Ecclesiastes* in his declining, latter years disclosing an old man's sorrow. Here is the record of Solomon's regret for his grave moral lapses (1 Kings 11:1) You see, while the *Song of Solomon* is a book of **sweet romance**, and *Proverbs* is a book of **sacred regulations**, *Ecclesiastes* is a book of **sad retrospect**. Here is an old man who has come to the end of life having lived a wasted life and he preaches a sermon. Solomon says, " *I want to preach you a sermon on the purpose and meaning of life. I want to tell you what it is to live your life apart from a vital relationship with the Lord.*" So *Ecclesiastes* is a very

1. Relevant Book:

In a world full of disillusioned people, Solomon speaks as one who has tasted all that then world has to offer, the best of pleasures, the height of power, the ultimate in prestige, worldwide popularity and still he remains unsatisfied. My Solomon had tried it all. And is there not a search for satisfaction in this old world ? There are people today who are trying everything. They are looking for something that will address the deepest needs of their heart. The problem is they are looking in the wrong place.

2. Philosophical Book:

It seeks to answer the questions. What is life all about ? What does it mean ? Why are we here ? What is our purpose in life ? Where is it all going ? Is life worth living ? So Ecclesiastes examines the question, "*Is there life before death ?*" A Jewish writer once described life as *a blister on top of a tumour and a boil on top of that.*" The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life, " *to an onion, you peel it off one layer at a time and sometimes you weep.*" Some time ago in the city of Chicago a sewer worker and a well known agnostic were being interviewed. They were asked a question concerning their personal philosophy of life. The agnostic said this, " *There is a statement in the Bible which summarizes my life, ' We have toiled all night and have taken nothing. '*" The man who worked on the sewer said this, " *I digge de ditch to gette de money to buy de food to gette de strength to digge de ditch.*" I wonder is that how you feel ?

3. Depressing Book:

It is a book that at times can very pessimistic. One phrase appears twenty nine times in the book. Do you know what it is ? " *Under the sun.* " (2:11) This defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heavens point of view. Solomon is applying his own wisdom and experience to the complex situation and he is trying to make some sense out life. Now of course Solomon writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10-11 2 Tim 3:16) so what he wrote is what God wanted his people to have. But please keep in mind Solomon's viewpoint for he is examining " *life under the sun.*" Dr. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarizes Solomon's outlook when he says,

This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light.

You see, if our vision is limited to this earth and this life, we will never understand what life is all about and what makes it worth living. My is this not where the value of this book can be seen ? It concludes that only God can satisfy the deepest hungers of the human heart. So while much of the book is pessimistic, it ends on a note of assurance. Beyond " *the sun,*" is a living God who can and fill the hearts of those who will let Him. Now as I

have said Ecclesiastes is actually a sermon. Solomon is saying, " *I want to preach you a sermon on the purpose and meaning of life. I want to tell you what it is to live your life apart from the Lord* " The results are the book of Ecclesiastes. Now as we examine this book there are three things I want us to consider.

(1) THE START OF HIS SERMON

Chs'1:1-1:11

This book is a sermon. There is the announcement of a theme, a brief introduction, a developing of the theme and a practical application in conclusion. Do you see here,

(a) *THE PREACHERS TEXT:*

It's interesting to notice that Solomon has put the key to this book right at the front door. For he says in (1:2) " *Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher all is vanity.* " And just in case we missed it, he put the same key at the back door. (12:8) Do you see that word " *vanity*, " ? It does not refer to egotism. Today we connect vanity with a self-inflated ego. It reminds me of the woman who told her pastor, " *when I confess my sins, I confess the sin of vanity most of all. You see, every morning, I admire myself in the mirror for half an hour* " The pastor replied, *my dear lady, that isn't the sin of vanity. You're suffering from the sin of imagination.* " Solomon was not suffering from a self inflated ego. No. He had been there, done that, and even had a T shirt. But he was only left with the conclusion that " *if this is all that there is, then it's all vanity, empty, futile and meaningless.* " The word

" *vanity*" (*hevel*) here means " *something without substance which quickly passes away,* " One Hebrew professor described " *hevel*," as " *whatever is left after you break a soap bubble.* " My do you realise that's what life without the Lord is ? I wonder, where did Solomon find this text for his sermon ? Maybe one day Solomon was at the library in the Royal Palace. Perhaps he pulled down some books written by his Dad, King David, maybe the book of Psalms. Could he be that as he was thumbing through those Psalms that he came across Psalm 39 ? And as he read that Psalm he came to the fifth verse which says " *Behold thou hast made my days as an handbreath, and mine age is as nothing before thee. Verily every man at his best state is vanity.* "

My could it be that when Solomon read that verse he said, " *That's the verse that describes my life. It is so brief and I have come to understand that the things in this world are only vanity. They are emptiness. They are meaningless. They are only puffs of smoke.* " Solomon has found the text which describes his life. I wonder is there a verse in the Bible that describes your life ? If the Lord would write down one verse that would describe the story of your life, what would it be ? Solomon says, " *Here's the story of my life, vanity of vanities all is vanity saith the preacher* " (a)

(b) *THE PREACHER'S TOPIC:*

Do you see that phrase again in (1:3) ? " *Under the sun,* " that is life lived without reference to the Lord. My life for the believer is not to be lived " *under the sun,* " life for

the Christian is to be lived " *in the heavenlies*," (Eph 1:3) Is this not Solomon's topic ? Life without God in the centre of our lives is utterly futile. Now to illustrate that Solomon tells us that,

1. Life without the Lord is Meaningless:

Its like an Unending Cycle: (1:4) In other words, one generation is always passing off the scene and another generation is always coming on the scene. My that is not a fatalistic approach to life, this is a realistic approach to life without the Lord. We get up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch TV, read a book, and go to bed only to repeat that until our retirement. Then we die. Well, is this not how a lot of folk view life ? Solomon is saying " *on the surface life looks a gerbil running on a wheel, what's the point ?*" My is this how you view life ?

Its like an Unchanging Cycle: Solomon talks about the sun rising, (1:5) the wind blowing and the rivers running. (1:7) His point is that nature does not change. There is motion but not promotion. Life is just like a merry go round. Solomon says round and round and round we go like a merry go round. There's no meaning to life, no purpose to it. Is that how you feel this ... ? I am told that Charles Darwin who was no friend of the gospel when he came down to the end of his life someone asked him about all the experiments and the things that he had done and how he would describe his life. He took a Bible text "*I have toiled all night and then nothing.*" What would be the text of the sermon of your life ? Well, Solomon said,

" *My life without the Lord has been meaningless.*" 1.

2. Life without the Lord is Monotonous:

Everything is boring, utterly boring. Is that not what he says in (1:8) ? We can never see enough or hear enough to bring satisfaction. Everything ultimately brings weariness and boredom, forcing us to constantly seek new things. Do you see what Solomon is saying ? A life lived without the Lord is not fulfilling. Tennis star Boris Becker was at the very top of the tennis world yet he was on the brink of suicide. He said, "*I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed. It's the old song of movie stars and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are happy with nothing. I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string.*" My you may look for a new toy, a new talent, or a new treasure for satisfaction but you will never find it.

Do you know why ? Because God has put " *eternity in your heart*," (3:11) and no-one can find peace and ,satisfaction apart from Him. My a life lived to oneself, on oneself, by oneself, and for oneself is where " *there is no remembrance of former things, neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after* " (1:11) My if you make the tragic mistake of living your life " *under the sun*," with no regard for the Lord, then one day you will be a Solomon. You'll back over your life with sadness and forward with fear to the grim ghost of death. The text of your life will be " *Vanity of vanities all is vanity.* " (1)

(2) THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS SERMON

Ch's 1:12-10:20

Now keep in mind he is describing " *life under the sun*," life lived without any reference to the Lord. Notice,

(a) ***THE THINGS THAT SOLOMON HAD SOUGHT:***

Opening his heart he tells us how he had experimented with every element in the laboratory of life, trying to unlock the secret of life and make life worth living. Did you notice that Solomon experimented in,

1. The Intellectual World:

Look at what he says in (1:13) What he is saying is that I gave myself to study. I decided that I would find wisdom. I would find satisfaction in education. Now Solomon was given a gift of wisdom from the Lord. Do you recall what the Lord said to him ? " *Ask what I shall give thee.*" (1 Kings 3:5) God just gave him a blank cheque. To his credit Solomon said, " *I want you to give me wisdom so I will know how to lead these people.*" The Bible says that God filled this man Solomon with supernatural wisdom so that he became the wisest man who ever lived. In fact, the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, the Bible says " *she came to prove him with hard questions.*" (1 Kings 10:1) When he answered all her questions she said, " *the half was not told me.* " (1 Kings 10:7) He was a wise man, he was an educated man. In the book of Kings he tells us some of things that he did. " *And he spake three thousand proverbs, and his*

songs were a thousand and five." (1 Kings 4:32) The Bible says " *And he spoke of trees,*" (4:33) That he was an expert in **botany**. He also spoke of beasts. He was an expert in **zoology**. And of fowl, he was an expert in **ornithology**. He spoke of creeping things, he was an expert in **entomology**. If you wanted to know anything about any realm or field of study, all you had to do was ask Solomon for he was a very educated man. And he thought he find would satisfaction in the stimulation of his mental faculties. But notice what he says in (1:17-18)

The more he learned the less he knew, and the less he liked what he learned. My human knowledge can answer the questions of time, but it cannot answer the questions of eternity. Philosophy can answer the question about man's mind, but it cannot answer the question about man's soul. Science can answer the question, " *how does a man die ?*" But it cannot answer the question, " *if a man dies will he live again ?*" Ethics can answer the question, " *how can a man be right with other men ?*" But it cannot answer the question, " *how can a man be right with God.*"

Solomon is saying, " *take it from me, I had all the education a man could ever hope for, but it produced no satisfaction.*" Now I am not putting a premium on a lack of education. I am not minimizing the importance of it. For it is important. You don't have to be ignorant. I heard about old boy who got up in church and prayed one time and said, " *Lord, I thank you for my ignorance, and I pray you will make me ignoranter* " My we must not belittle education, but it is possible to have a head full and a heart empty.

2. The Material World:

Indeed he sets before us his financial portfolio in this very passage. He says, " *I made me great works I builded me houses,*" (2:4) Solomon got interested in architectural design, " *I planted me vineyards,*" he became an expert in agriculture, he says " *I made me gardens and orchards,*" he got interested in horticulture. Then he says, " *I got me servants and maidensalso I had great possessions.* " My here was a man literally swimming in a sea of opulence and affluence. Do you know what the Word of God says ? " *the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold* " (1 Kings 10:14) Do you know how much that is worth ? \$ 304 million. But that's only the gold. The silver was so abundant that it was not even counted. (10:21) So we could safely round up the \$304 million to about \$500 million a year. About £250 million pounds per year !

Did that bring contentment ? No, for Solomon says " *All was vanity and vexation of spirit.*" Solomon discovered that you can have a lot in your purse and have nothing in your person. You can be a prince on the outside and a pauper on the inside. I wonder as Christians do we have a stewardship perspective on all that God has given us ? Do you recall what David Solomon's father prayed " *for all things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee.* " (1 Chron 29:14) 1, 2,

3. The Physical World:

He says in (2:8) " *I tried the delights of the sons of men.*" That means that Solomon tried sexual pleasure. In fact,

did you know that the Bible says that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three concubines. (1 Kings 11:3) A thousand women. One old boy read that and said, " *My soul in the morning. I can't keep one female happy much less a thousand* " Can you imagine how it was when all the in laws came round to the palace at the weekend ? Seven hundred mother's in law. One woman came to her husband and said, " *you may as well know that mother is moving in with us.*" The husband did not say a word. The wife asked, " *Well, don't you think we need to buy a bigger house ?* The husband said, " *It wouldn't make any difference. She would eventually find us.*" Of course we are living now in the days of sexual liberation. The idea that the gift of sex is something for the confines of holy matrimony is laughed at. (1 Cor 6:13)

The idea of keeping yourself pure until marriage is scorned. My we live in an age of sexual permissiveness and what has it brought us ? It has brought us broken homes. It has brought us scarred boys and girls. It has brought us sexually transmitted diseases, Aids. So much for your sexual revolution. ***Young folk, will you remember that you are more than just a physical being ?*** The world tells us, that we came from the animals, that will die like animals, therefore you can live like animals. The world says, its does not matter if you commit sexual immorality, that's the way the animals are. It does not matter if you live in the barnyards of life. But I am here to tell you this you are more than a physical being. God created you with a soul, and your soul will spend eternity in heaven or hell, and the only thing that will make the difference is your relationship with Jesus Christ. Now do

you see that Solomon had it all as far as this world is concerned ? But look at how he sums it up in (2:17) ? (a)

(b) *THE THINGS THAT SOLOMON HAD SEEN:*

You see having failed to find the answer to life's longings in the things that he had sought, he began to observe life more carefully. He sees everything as it unfolds around him. Time and again he says, "*And moreover I saw under the sun,*" (3:16) "*Then I returned and I saw vanity under the sun,*" (4:7) "*There is an evil which I have seen under the sun.*" (6:1) Solomon records the vanity of everything he saw. As John Phillips says, he had seen the vanity of

1. Time without eternity: (3:1-11)
2. Mortality without Immortality: (3:18-22)
3. Might without right: (4:1-3)
4. Plenty without peace: (4:4-8)
5. Prosperity without Posterity: (4:9-12)
6. Sovereignty without wisdom: (4:13-16)
7. Religion without reality: (5:1-6)
8. Wealth without health: (5:7-20)
9. Treasure without pleasure: (6:1-16)
10. Life without length: (6:11-12)

Do you see what he says in (3:11) ? That word "*world,*" means "*the ages,*" or as someone has suggested, "*eternity*" The cry wrung from the empty heart of Solomon was echoed by the immoral Augustine before he found Christ. "*Thou hast made us for Thyself*" prayed Augustine "*and our hearts are restless until they rest in*

Thee." You see, God has made the human soul for eternity and there is nothing big enough "*under the sun,*" to fill it.

(c) *THE THINGS THAT SOLOMON HAD STUDIED:*

" *I returned and considered,*" he says again and again. (4:1, 4, 15) Now keep in mind, he is pointing out life "*under the sun.*" He is telling us how the man of the world looks at life. Solomon is backslidden and he is a picture of all that folk aspire to be without the Lord. In (Ch's 7-10) Solomon is cynical. Do you see what he says in (7:15) In other words what's the use of even trying to be good. Do you see what he says about women in (7:26-28) ? Roaming his harem, listening to the babble of foreign voices, aware of the intrigue and plots that went on and of the petty squabbles among his many wives, Solomon groaned because he could not find a single one compatible with him. Increasingly he became obsessed with the fact of death, with the fact that death awaits everyone. (8:18-19) Almost in every chapter he touches on death.

Solomon keeps talking about death. Have you ever heard the expression "*the fly in the ointment,*" ? It's taken right out of this section. (10:1) Do you know something ? It's a dead fly. For that is the fly in the ointment for every person only living for this life. Sooner or later death will come and end it all. My here is an old man looking back over a wasted life and he realized he only has one thing to do and that's sit there and wait for death. You know as I thought about Solomon I could not help think

about that old gospel song.

**Wasted years, wasted years oh how foolish
As you walk on in darkness and fear
Turn around, turn around, God is calling,
He's calling you from a life of wasted years**

Christian are you like Solomon ? Are you wasting your years ? Or are you investing them ? Are you living life " *under the sun*," or are you living life " *beyond the sun* "? (1) (2)

(3) THE SUMMARY OF HIS SERMON

For in the last couple of chapters in the book he wraps his sermon up. He talks about,

(a) *THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE:*

In (11:1-6) he talks about the challenge of life's *Prospects*: in (11:7-8) he talks about the challenge of life's *Presence*: in (11:9-10) he talks about the challenge of life's *Past*: Now there is an underlying theme in these opening verses, it's the matter of sowing seed and winning people to the Lord. Did you notice how we are to sow the seed ?

1. Sow Confidently: (11:1)

The picture here is sowing rice on the water. This was a custom in Egypt. Sow it confidently and it will come back. Somewhere in the future there will be a harvest.

2. Sow Liberally: (11:2)

Not every seed is going to come up. Some of the seed will not come up. But sow liberally and the more seed you sow, the more will come up.

3. Sow Intelligently: (11:3)

There are principles of nature. Clouds empty rain. There are certain eternal principles that we can depend on as we sow the seed.

4. Sow Diligently: (11:4)

What he is saying is we ought not let circumstances and condition's hinder us in sowing seed. There is really never a good time, so far as circumstances are concerned. We are to make opportunities , be instant in season and out of season.

5. Sow Believingly: (11:5-6)

;You see we don't understand how a child is formed in a mother's womb. Now we might know a great deal more than Solomon, but it's still a mystery. The point is, just as we don't understand the work of God in certain physical realms, neither do we understand the work of God in certain spiritual realms. So we are to sow trustfully. Trust God to do what He can do. My are we sowing the seed of God's Word and trusting God to give the increase ? (a)

(b) THE COMMANDS FOR LIFE:

Did you notice the "R's," in (Ch 11& 12) ? The first one is "Rejoice, " (11:9) the second one is "Renounce, " (11:10) and the final one is "Remember. " (12:1) Now of course " *to remember;*" means far more than simply to recall that there is a Creator. It means " *to pay attention to.*" The word signifies commitment. My this is Solomon's version of the words of Christ, " *but seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.*"

(Matt 6:33) You see, to remember the Lord is to commit ourselves to Him. Have you done that ? Of course Solomon is speaking here to young people, but remember that growing up soon gives way to growing old. Benjamin Disraeli the famous Jewish statesman who helped make Britain great wrote, " *Youth is a blunder, manhood a struggle and old age a regret.*" The picture here is that of a house falling apart and returning to dust. (2 Cor 5:21 2 Pet 1:13) My the days of service will soon be over, the opportunities will be past and we will be called to give an account at the judgment seat of Christ. (a) (b)

(c) THE CLIMAX IN LIFE:

What is most decisive moment in life ? Well, do you see how Solomon closes the book ? (12:13-14) Here is the answer to disillusionment, cynicism and meaninglessness " *fear God and keep his commandments.*" At last Solomon lifted his head and got his eyes on the world to come. Do you need to do that ? Stephen Olford was called home to glory on 29th August 2004. In his younger days he was particularly gifted in the field of mechanical

engineering. He enrolled in the Devonport Technical College and sought to further his dream of a promising career. He had been saved at the age of 12 and answered the call to preach at the age of 17, but he came to the place where he was disappointed and disillusioned with other believers. *So he turned his back on the church and became a thoroughgoing backslider.* He wanted to see what the world had to offer to him. So he turned his back on the call of God and the home of missionary parents.

One night Stephen was coming home from a motorcycle race when he suffered a terrible accident. He lay on an icy road for hours , which ultimately led to an extremely advanced stage of pneumonia. *He was sent to the hospital and after a few hours the doctors said that there nothing else they could do, so they sent him home to die. Stephen Olford lay in a recovery bed for several months.* He testified later that it was during that time that the Lord began to deal with his heart about his future. One day, his mother came in and dropped a note on his bed. It was a note from his father, who was on the mission field in Africa.

The amazing thing was that in those days, it took 3 months for a letter to arrive in England from Africa, thus his father had no idea of his accident, and that he had been sent home to die. After his mother left the room, Stephen with a heart cold towards the Lord opened the letter from his father. In it, were but a few simple words that read,

*" Dear Stephen,
Only one life
Twill soon be past
Only what's done for Jesus
Will last "*

It was at that moment when Stephen Olford bowed his head, humbled his heart, and determined that his "**only one life,**" would be lived for the Saviour who loved him and gave Himself for him. Is that what you need to do ?