

July 11

Scriptures: Read Ecclesiastes 1, 2 & 3

Key Verse: "...for without him [God], who can eat or find enjoyment?" (Ecclesiastes 2:25) (NIV).

Overview

The first chapter of Ecclesiastes serves as an introduction to the whole book. "The preacher", Solomon, pessimistically declares that all of human existence in the earthly realm ("under the sun", 1:3) is the ultimate of vanity and futility. The later context will show, however, that he is not a complete pessimist, for this is true only apart from God. He asks the main question of: "What profit has a man from all his labour..." (1:3). If a person looks at life and lives life from a worldly perspective, there is no advantage or true satisfaction from man's labour, nothing is of lasting value, and everything is a vain repetition; it is as monotonous as the process of nature (1:4-11).

To justify and demonstrate his strong statement that "all is vanity", the preacher relates various personal, real-life illustrations. He has found that his pursuit of wisdom "concerning all things done under heaven" (i.e., earthly knowledge, cf. 1 Kings 4:33) has been unsatisfactory, grievous, and fruitless (1:13, 16-18). His quest has led him to understand that life is full of paradoxes, and mankind is deficient because of his own sinful nature (1:15). If people do not find the true spiritual wisdom from above (James 3:17), which is God's wisdom which He ordained before the ages (the gospel of Jesus Christ, 1 Cor. 2:7), then everything will be truly vain.

Finding no profit from his intellectual and philosophical pursuits, Solomon turned to pleasure as a possible source of complete satisfaction. He experimented with wine, women, and song, as well as materialistic luxuries. Although these gave him pleasure and happiness when he was in the midst of it, he found upon careful consideration that his pleasure was only temporal (Job 20:5), and he realized that these things also proved to be vanity and unprofitable (2:1-11). Often people in the pursuit of worldly pleasures will tell you they are happy and have no void in their life, but they have not carefully considered their situation in the light of Solomon's wisdom. True and lasting happiness is found only in knowing Jesus.

Solomon was in despair when he realized that, although "wisdom excels folly", the advantage of earthly wisdom is not for long, since both the wise man and the fool will experience the same thing, namely death (2:13-16). Solomon was not only disgusted with the emptiness of life, but with labour as well, for since he would die "like a fool", all for which he had sorrowfully worked might end up in the hands of a fool who did not deserve it (2:17-23).

What does Solomon conclude? Even though life's pleasures are temporal and not completely satisfying, the best man can do under the circumstances is to enjoy the fruit of his labour. Enjoyment of life, however, was understood by Solomon to be a gift of God (2:24), "for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" (2:25, N.I.V.).

Chapter three begins by showing that everything on earth occurs according to the predetermination and providence of God. The preacher asserts that man is merely caught up in

the divine scheme of things. Nothing is by chance; there is a God-given time for everything which God has made “beautiful” or “appropriate” (3:11). Although mankind’s knowledge of God is limited, God has given man reason and has put eternity within man’s heart so he might be conscious of Him, and thus learn to fear Him (respect, honour, obey). Because of Solomon’s wisdom and his consciousness of God, he affirms that everything God does shall remain forever, and He is perfection (3:14). Man, however, is imperfect and unjust, like beasts.

Solomon had the faith that God would judge both the righteous and the wicked to rectify the chaos caused by sinful man; he knew that, in its proper time, God’s plan would come about (3:16-17). Solomon was unsure if the plan of God entailed the “going upward” of man’s spirit (3:19-21). The fuller revelation of God in the New Testament reveals the truth that the spirit of the one who is righteous, God-fearing, and trusting in Jesus, will go upward to glory.

Prayer

Lord, without You, life is truly meaningless, for You created us with a purpose, and only in fulfilling Your purpose are we ourselves fulfilled. We praise You today for Your promise that we will one day “go upward” to be with You forever.