

LIFE UNDER THE SUN

Speaker: Prof. Joseph John

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Scripture: Eccl 1:1-4, 3:11-14, 5:18-20. 8:26-27, 12:13-14 (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-4

¹ The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

² "Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

³ What do people gain from all their labors

at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ Generations come and generations go,

but the earth remains forever."

Now as it is mentioned, this book was written by King Solomon, King David's son. The book of Ecclesiastes is called a wisdom book in the Bible and that explores the meaning of life. Jewish tradition says that King Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youth, and Ecclesiastes near the end of his life. In his final years, Solomon had good reasons to regret the foolish path of idolatry, and also the carnal life he followed. It ultimately led to the decline and division of his kingdom as is narrated in 1 Kings 11.

The English title of the book Ecclesiastes comes from a Greek word *ecclesiastes* meaning a member of an assembly or speaker to an assembly. We are familiar with this word *ecclesia* meaning church or assembly. The Hebrew translation is the word *Kohelet* often translated as teacher or preacher.

A quick reading of this book might give the impression that Solomon is giving a very pessimistic and cynical view of human life. It might also give the impression that he wrote this book in an unorganized way. However, if you do a careful reading, you clearly see that he gives us very important warnings and lessons how to live our life under the sun (i.e. our earthly life) wisely.

Ecclesiastes is a book relevant to all ages and is relevant today, even though it was written around 935 BC. Many scholars believe that if there is a modern book in the Bible, this is that book, and you would wonder how God's Spirit inspired Solomon to write such a book at such a time, and still be so relevant.

Before we get into the major themes of this book, let us look at some of the phrases that keep being repeated.

- *Under the sun:* appears about 29 times and refers to our earthly life.
- *Meaningless:* or vanity as some versions put it. The teacher repeatedly uses the Hebrew word *hevel* literally meaning smoke or vapor to describe life as temporary, fragile and difficult to understand.
- *Chasing the wind:* stating how foolish many of our pursuits are, equivalent to chasing after the wind. And I am sure King Solomon, at the end of his life, realized that many of his pursuits were foolish; he was actually chasing after the wind.

MAJOR THEMES

1. HOW TO FIND TRUE SATISFACTION IN OUR EARTHLY LIFE?

This is a very important question all of us are battling with, and we somehow try to answer it in our own way. Solomon presents this in a very systematic way.

2:3 “I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men and women to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.”

Therefore, he tried all kinds of things. He had the wealth, he had the power, he had everything at his command. Therefore, he tried pleasure and great projects, and he somehow tried to find satisfaction and to see what was good.

But he says in 2:11, “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

We need not go through all those great projects that he did to figure out at the end of our lives, that you know all that we were chasing was after the wind. When you read this verse, it can give us a very negative perspective of life, but that is not really what the main point is. We will flesh it out as we go on.

3: 11-14

“¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. It has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

What Solomon is saying here is the key to finding satisfaction.

i) You should know that God has set eternity in the hearts of all men and women. And therefore, no human pursuit will fully satisfy us. All our human efforts and work have their place, but they should not be an end in themselves. That is very important for us to realize.

You might have heard these famous words of Saint Augustine, “God created us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him.” That’s exactly the point. Our human pursuits have their place but they, in themselves, will never give us the satisfaction.

ii) There is a big difference in doing whatever God wants us to do and between doing something so that we can make a name for ourselves. And the mistake we should not make is to do something so that we can somehow make a name for ourselves, and then we will never find satisfaction. That is the warning he is giving.

Solomon says, “¹² I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³ That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God.”

He immediately adds that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil. This is the gift of God.

He keeps on repeating this kind of phrase many times. So therefore, Paul also said in 1 Timothy 6:17 “God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” God has given us many things for our enjoyment. God wants us to have true satisfaction in our lives, and He wants each one of us to really enjoy our life. Therefore, we must do things in God’s way.

“¹⁴ I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men revere him.”

We need to acknowledge that God is sovereign and we must always stand in awe of Him. We must remember that every breath of our life we owe to the Lord. We should always remember that. Therefore, Solomon says that God wants us to enjoy whatever He has given, all the many gifts and blessings.

But the danger is that if we set all our minds and hearts on these blessings and gifts, then we'll be wrong. Instead, our love should be turned towards the giver, God. And we must live in obedience to Him. So, we'll find true satisfaction if we understand the limits of what we can do and what we should enjoy. And we should ensure that whatever we do or enjoy is in God's will.

2. OUR ATTITUDE TO WORK.

5: 18-20

“¹⁸ Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man or a woman to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given.”

There are a few things that we can see from this verse:

- God wants us to find satisfaction in all that we do, especially the toilsome labor. God wants us to work hard, put all the effort.
- God knows how many days we have but definitely it is not eternity. Therefore, it is all the more important that we live wisely and seek true satisfaction.

“¹⁹ Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work, this is a gift from God.” According to this verse, God knows what is good for us and only when God gives and enables us to enjoy them, we will truly be happy.

Therefore, we must always remember that God is sovereign, and God knows what is good for us. very often, all of us go through this problem – we often think that we got a bad deal from God, and we should have got that, or got this. But always remember, God knows what is good for us, and when God gives us something, God also makes sure that He would enable us to enjoy them.

But let us look at the other aspect of it – the attitude towards our work and labor. In this context, we can take a cross reference from Colossians 3:23-24 where Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, especially to the slaves, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. it is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Now this gives us a clue how to find satisfaction in whatever God has given, whatever labor we are put in. and one of the most important things is the attitude by which we do it. and the key to do is to do everything as under the Lord. That is the right attitude.

Two days ago, I had to spend at least two to three hours extra because the research assistants who were allotted to me for a course which I am teaching, did not follow my instructions, and they did completely wrong things, so much so that I had to put in a lot of effort. I was feeling very unhappy, but then God reminded me, whom are you working for? That helped me a lot. My attitude changed. I am doing everything to the Lord. “Thank you, Lord. You are teaching me patience and wisdom. Maybe next time I will give better instructions.

I think our attitude to work is important, as is our motivation to work. Sometimes it is so hard, and sometimes people might take advantage of us too. I am sure the slaves in Paul's time would have felt the same thing. But we must remember that we are actually working for the Lord, and that will make all the difference.

Another way of finding satisfaction is knowing that there is a big blessing. For example, it says, "You know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." There is a reward. We must remember that when we work, whatever God has placed in our hands, when we do it with an attitude that we are serving the Lord and not just an earthly boss, we would be blessed.

At the same time, it is important to put in the hard work. The word used is toilsome work. You see this in the book of Genesis. There are two things God did before the fall of man. One is marriage and the other is work. Genesis 2 tells us that God wanted Adam to work. Because of the curse, work might have become very troublesome and may be hard, but God would give us the needed grace. This attitude would make a huge difference.

v. 20 They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of heart.

just now we said that we must find satisfaction in our work, we should have the right attitude, we must put in a lot of hard work. Immediately we must add this.

He is giving us a big warning in this verse. We are satisfied with the work and we put in a lot of work, but often we are far busier than God intended us to be. especially in modern times, one of the curses is that we are too busy, and because of this, what happens is mentioned in v. 20. Because God keeps him occupied, he seldom reflects on the days of his life. modern life keeps us so busy that we have no time to reflect. What do you mean by reflecting? To think, to reason, to consider what God is doing. Solomon says that one of the reasons why we do not reflect is that we are too occupied.

One of the biggest damages done to us by modern technologies, especially the social media, is to keep us occupied all the time, giving us no time to think and reflect. I am sure we can all relate to this. Even during the few minutes we are in the elevator, we pull out our mobile phones and start scrolling.

Few days ago, I was listening to an interesting video on YouTube by Dr. Arthur Brooks, a professor from Harvard University. Being a social scientist, he has spent a lot of time studying happiness and satisfaction. He says, "If you don't keep your mind empty sometimes, but are all the time being distracted, for example like scrolling on your phone, then you will never be able to think or reflect.

As a teacher, I have a serious concern when I look at my students. I find that when I ask a question, I get an immediate parrot answer without any thinking. I believe that is one of the dangers happening to all of us. And one of the reasons is because we don't allow our minds to reflect on what God is doing. We forget to look around, learn, build relationships.

So, let's take care. Our technologies are very important, but take time to think and reflect, and also check whether you are busier than what you are supposed to be. as for myself, I find that as I have gotten older, I keep getting a lot of invitations. I do enjoy all that; it does give me a feeling of importance, being called here and there. But one bit lesson that I learned these past few months is to say no, and to be very sure whether God really wants me to go there and do it.

Concentrating on a few things, looking at your life, reflecting on it, and seeing whether you are truly happy. Are you really after life's purpose and meaning? What does God want you to learn?

That's what Solomon, at the end of his life, is warning us. Don't allow yourself to be so busy all the time that you have no time to reflect. That would be a big mistake. One of my mentors used to say this: A busy life is often a barren life. So, being busy or feeling important is not very important. But what is important is whether we are really doing the things which God wants us to do.

One of the best prayers of us to pray is to pray like Moses.

Psalm 90:12 "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

We need to ask God to make us wise. And in my opinion, that is the most important lesson which Solomon gives us from this book of Ecclesiastes – to be wise. Whatever life we live in this world, we must live wisely. We need God's wisdom not to be occupied with too many things and to understand what to do, and what not to do.

3. OUR KNOWLEDGE HAS LIMITS.

8:16-17 "When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth, his eyes not seeing sleep day or night, then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning."

Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend. This is something which came as a surprise to me when I read it.

These verses should not discourage us from exploring for greater understanding or meaning but should keep us humble. There is a limit to our human knowledge and understanding.

Unfortunately, in the last century, we have developed a lot technologically. Therefore, we think that science has the answer to all questions. This can often be a foolish thinking, and young people could easily get misled and disillusioned. Science does not have the answer to many questions. I can say that as a scientist.

Solomon was right. There are many things we may never fully understand. We are finite creatures, but God is infinite in wisdom, knowledge, strength and power. But we are finite.

Unfortunately, social media has created another danger. Social media, YouTube has the answer to everything. Everything under the sun is known. That's the way people talk. So watch out! It's not true. As Solomon said, even if a wise man claims he knows everything, he cannot really comprehend.

CONCLUSION.

The book of Ecclesiastes reads like a PhD thesis. So, now we come to the concluding chapter.

12: 1 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'"

I do believe that King Solomon meant this because he wrote this book at the end of his life. And he can relate to all the foolish things he did. And I am sure he is warning us.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, when you have all the energy, when you have all the resources God has given, that time before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say I have no pleasure in them. It is a reminder to us not to forget or neglect God who is the source of all our life, our very breath and all that we have.

¹³ Now all has been heart; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.

¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

In conclusion, what Solomon is telling us that loving God and living in obedience to Him in all aspects of life is the whole duty of man, and that's the whole purpose of life. Then only will you find true satisfaction. This is the wise way to live our lives under the sun.

One of the wisest ways of living our earthly lives with wisdom is to take special efforts to read and study God's word and also live in obedience to God's word. Read the Bible cover to cover in whatever time you want to cover it – one year, two years, and so on. But read it. Last week, Pastor talked about another book in the Old Testament – the book of Leviticus, a book we very often find very difficult to read. But Pastor related how it found its fulfillment in Jesus.

God's Spirit has charted each and every book of the bible to make us wise. So, let's make sure that we not only read and study God's word, but we also take time to reflect and think as to what God wants us to do.

Amen.
