

All Is Vanity

Phillip Mullins

Introduction:

- I. A study of Ecclesiastes, and especially the theme “all is vanity,” is a philosophical matter.
 - A. Though we will end in theology, like all good philosophy should, it is upon philosophical ground which we must do much of our work.
 - B. However, it is not philosophy of the ivory tower variety.
 1. It is not merely lofty issues that nag Koheleth, but frustrations which are as broad as all humanity.
 1. The deep issues of life with which every man and woman wrestle are expressed by this caller of the assembly
 - a. Why am I here?
 - b. What is the meaning of life?
 - a. Where is it all leading?
 2. That is why there has to be a practical ring, a sermon-like tone to this lecture.
- II. Preview.
 - A. Understanding the use of the term vanity.
 - B. How vanity is manifested.
 - C. Interpreting the message about vanity.
 - D. The point of the message about vanity.
 - E. Statements of faith and hope.
 - F. The New Testament connection.
 - G. How to maneuver through the meaninglessness.
- III. Ecclesiastes is depressing, but also liberating.

Body:

- I. **Vanity Defined.**
 - A. Ecclesiastes 1:1-2.
 3. “Vanity” - *hebel* (Hebrew).
 - a. Literally - vapor, breath.
 - b. Synonyms commentators often use: fleeting, empty, worthless, deceitful.
 - c. Fox and Murphy prefer “absurd”.
 4. Besides the words of Koheleth, there is a wealth of usage in the Old Testament from which to draw insight.
 - a. *Hebel* is used to describe idols (Deut. 32:31; I Kings 16:13)
 - b. The brevity of human life (Job 7:16).
 - c. The pointlessness of living a pure life (Job 9:29-31).

- d. Multiple nuances - both brevity and pointlessness in the same context (Psalm 39:5-6, 11).
 - e. The prophets employed it especially to speak of worthlessness (Jer. 10:8; Lam. 4:17).
5. As with many terms used in the Scriptures we would be better served viewing it as a concept with various nuances.
 6. McKenna: "Futility, emptiness, ridiculous, incongruous, ironic, illusory, incomprehensible, valueless, nothing, absurd, temporary, all the words that might be employed to bear Qohelet's thought to us, can each be adequate in this or that particular situation in the exploration, but none are adequate in and of themselves to cause us to hear the real nature of the world's relation to its Creator." ("The Concept Of *Hebel* In The Book Of Ecclesiastes." *Scottish Journal Of Theology*, 22)
- B. Koheleth wears the word out, stretching it to its conceptual limits as he makes his pointed observations.
7. While the prophet delivers a divine message and the priest instructs from the divine law, the preacher or sage makes observations containing divine truth.
 8. It is first presented as earthy truth, but is actually concealing a divine message.

II. Vanity Manifested

B. Eccl. 1:3-11: The Vanity of Working But Getting Nowhere

1. The world is froth with activity.
2. The circuit of the sun and the moisture pattern reflects man's own ceaseless activity of the same labors day in and day out which lead nowhere.
 1. From common household chores (making beds, washing dishes, cutting grass) to our careers, it is the same projects and problems over and over; life is one big treadmill.
 2. History itself has a repetitive cycle to it, mankind is running around in circles.
 3. Each generation thinks it will make its mark but it doesn't; history either distorts your record or forgets you.

B. Eccl. 1:12-2:11: The Vanity Of Advancing But Not Obtaining

4. We may be tempted to think that if somehow we could break out of our small and limited lives, if we could become "somebody" and climb the ladder the view would be better, it would all make sense, and we would be satisfied.
 1. This man viewed life from a high perch - a wealthy ruler with superior wisdom.
 5. He tried finding meaning in wisdom (1:18)
 2. He tried fun and frolic (2:1-3)
 3. He carried out extensive building projects and piled up possessions (2:4-8)
 - a. He sought meaning in entertainment (America's panacea) (2:8)
 4. The outcome (2:10-11)

C. Eccl. 2:18-23: The Vanity Of Losing By Gaining

6. Could it be we could find meaning, not in what we attain, but what we leave **behind**?

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1. The reality is that you have no control over it after you are gone and some fool could ruin what you built.
 - D. It was not only in his own pursuit for meaning, but he found that vanity was everywhere he looked.
 1. Power for the oppressors and no comfort for the oppressed (4:1-3)
 2. Evil for the just and reward for the wicked (8:14)
 3. Time and chance happens to all (9:11-12)
 - E. Vanity is the lot for the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked; we are drowning in a sea of it.
 1. Though explored in detail early on, the theme of vanity is the melody of the book; it crops up throughout.
 2. It is no wonder he writes... (5:16-17)
 - F. The echo of Ecclesiastes throbs in the ears of everyone, it haunts us all.
- III. Interpreting The Message - "All Is Vanity".**
- A. What is going on with this man?
 7. Is he a worn-out, cynic who is jaded in his view of life?
 8. What is this book doing in the collection of Holy Scriptures?
 9. Is this man pessimistic, sadistic, or just realistic?
 - B. Three initial rules.
 10. You can't understand the book from a superficial reading. (You will see inconsistencies)
 1. You must guard against jumping to conclusions the preacher never intended for you to make. (The conclusion would be - "It doesn't matter how I live")
 11. You must harmonize and balance it with other scriptures.
 - a. It is part of revelation, not the final word from God.
 - b. It is a dimension of truth, not the sum total.
 - C. While "all is vanity" is the theme of the book, the key to understanding that message is to view it in light of the setting in which the observations are made - "life under the sun".
 12. References: 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 20; 1:16.
 13. Used 29 times in virtually every chapter.
 14. "Vanity" is what the preacher saw, "under the sun" is where he saw it.
 - a. The vantage point from which he made all his observations was on earth and limited to life on earth.
 - b. It is a totally secular viewpoint.
 - c. Though the subject of God appears on occasion, his observations are mainly about life without factoring in God.
 - D. Without heaven's insights and foresight what can we make of earthly living? An absurd, meaningless venture, which, in spite of hard work, in spite of prudence, in spite of discipline, in spite of talent and skill, leaves us with nothing.
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15. The conclusion, that all is vanity, is one which every human being living in the flesh on this earth will make at some time or another.

1. And usually the longer we live the more the realities expressed in Ecclesiastes ring true - economic loss, job setbacks, family troubles, sickness, and finally death just keep adding exclamation point after exclamation point that all is vanity!

IV. The Point Of The Message

A. Why do we desire some meaning to our existence, some lasting value to our labors?

B. Eccl. 3:11.

16. Why would the vanity of life trouble us unless we had an innate sense of eternity and justice?

1. Why would we care about meaning unless we were designed for it?
2. What the harsh reality of the vanity of life, expressed so eloquently in Ecclesiastes, does it force us to yearn for more than “life under the sun”.
 - a. It is when our world is dashed to pieces and we are left with nothing, that we are forced to look beyond life under the sun.
 - a. Thus, Ecclesiastes is a latent apologetic.

17. For just as we teeter on the brink of absolute despair, we look again at the book and, in just the right places, at just the right time, we see beyond life under the sun.

V. Islands Of Faith And Hope

A. References:

18. Eccl. 3:11, 14-17
19. 5:1-2
20. 8:12-13
21. 12:13-14

B. The preacher can see clearly but painfully what is happening “under the sun”.

C. Yet, he also knows God is above it all, that the sovereign Lord of the universe is enthroned.

22. He can’t make out the work of God, he can’t understand what He is doing, how He is doing it, and the schedule on which He is working.

1. Yet, Koheleth knows God is there and that He rules.
2. Yancey: “That is the point of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell. Life does not make sense outside of God, and will never fully make sense because we are not God.” (“Ecclesiastes: The High Counterpoint Of Boredom.” *The Reformed Journal*, 17)

D. Thus, Ecclesiastes is layered, not contradictory.

23. Various explanations for the design of Ecclesiastes.

- a. Liberal critics see multiple authors, each adding his unique spin.
- b. Some believe Koheleth is irrational.
- c. Some see his remarks of faith and hope as sarcasm.

24. A more accurate view is to see layers in the book.

- a. The ground level is “all is vanity”.
 - b. The bedrock underneath is God.
25. Like walking through a dark field at night with periodic flashes of lightening, Koheleth injects these statements about God which briefly thrust hope onto the scene.
26. Kidner: “...such a sequence is typical of Qoheleth’s overall method, which is to present a prevailing picture of earthly futility and tragedy, almost (yet not wholly) unrelieved by any glimmer of light. Where other writers would commend the light to us directly, Qoheleth does it by making the darkness intolerable, allowing the light only the rarest gleam to provoke the observant into second thoughts.” (*The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, 103)
- E. Herein is where we discover Ecclesiastes’ liberating power.
27. It wakes us up to the naked truth that we try to deny but are forced to face at certain times - life is hurtful, unfair, and void of meaning.
- 1. It reminds us that our frustrations and emptiness are not unique, but the common lot of mankind.
28. This is the book that says go ahead and admit to the harshness of life and quit fooling yourself into thinking that you will find meaning in it and build something of lasting value from it.
29. The quicker we realize that, the sooner we will start to look for what meaning and value is possible for us.
- F. Herein is the subtle but mighty message left by the preacher which the rest of the Bible thunders with bone-jarring force - *the point of life is to trust in God with hope that our life will have meaning even though everything about our earthly, physical experience tells us that it’s all in vain.*
30. Ralph Waldo Emerson: “All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen”.
- 1. The preacher challenges us to trust in the Creator in spite of what we have seen (“all is vanity”).
 - 2. In a well-managed, orderly, and just world there would be little faith required of us.
 - 3. And there is our calling - to keep faith and hope in an absurd and meaningless life.

VI. Koheleth And The Messiah

- A. Isaiah 49 is laden with Messianic declarations and overtones.
- 1. Vs. 3-4.
 - 2. How Koheleth-like these sentiments are.
 - a. The vanity of labor.
 - b. Yet, trust placed in God.
- B. Is there any life that when it was over could have been viewed as more vain than that of Jesus’?
31. In Ecclesiastes death is the great leveler, the pin in the bubble of earthly accomplishments.

32. Jesus had a large following, He performed incredible feats, but He died a shamed criminal.
 33. His own disciples were saying, “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel...” (Luke 24:21).
 34. As Jesus lay in the tomb, it appeared as though everything that He said, everything that He had done had been in vain.
 35. Indeed, the Christ was made like His brethren in all things (Heb. 2:17).
- C. Christ showed that though an earthly existence may seem to be futile, even one lived perfectly, that it is not and He paved a way to victory over all the vanity.
 - D. Paul, Christ’s chosen elaborator for His gospel, thrust waves of light upon our dark and empty days.

VII. **Koheleth And The Apostle.**

- A. Romans 8:18-23.
 1. An admission that life is filled with sufferings, even for the believer in Christ.
 2. Further confirmation that life under the sun is futile, and that it is part of God’s plan.
 3. Yet, the futility that followed the fall of man is designed to give birth to hope.
 4. And this passage promises a deliverance and redemption to those in Christ.
- B. II Corinthians 4:16-18.
 5. One of the reasons why life is so vain, and one of the nuances of the meaning of the word, is that everything we know decays (possessions, bodies).
 6. The apostle’s divine insight is that the physical is decomposing, but our inner person can be renewed daily.
 7. What a tragic existence it is to only see the outward, which is to only see vanity.
 8. What an advantage to be told that there is more than meets the eye, there is something about us which is eternal.
- C. I Corinthians 15:50-57.
 9. We can transcend this old “life under the sun” and break free from its vanity.
 - a. The preacher had said that death was the ultimate stroke *of* vanity.
 - b. The apostle says that Christ offers the ultimate blow *against* vanity.
 10. In Christ, we are promised a new body and a new, eternal life.
 11. And as a result...vs. 58.
 - a. Our life can produce something worthwhile and lasting.
 - b. We can find meaning and purpose.
 - c. It is found in living for Christ.
 1. In Christ we can break the curse of the vanity of life!
- D. Philippians 2:15-16.

12. The work of the Lord not only results in the salvation of our soul, but it can contribute to the salvation of other souls.
13. It matters not what you do for a living, what you can produce from your labor, the work which really has meaning and profit is investing in people with the word of God.
14. This is the only work which will last.

VIII. Maneuvering Through The Meaninglessness.

- A. Have realistic expectations about earthly living.
 15. Our problem is that we expect too much out of life under the sun.
 16. If we could learn the fine balance of having a generally positive outlook on life while at the same time not being shocked when it disappoints us.
 17. We need to expect out of life what Ecclesiastes teaches and, at the same time, strive for what the New Testament promises.
- B. Focus on enjoyment rather than accomplishment.
 18. After his disgust with the vanity of his labor - Eccl. 1:24.
 19. After his admission that God is in control and we humans don't know what is going to happen - Eccl. 3:22.
 20. Is not the wise man telling us to enjoy whatever we have, little or much, and not be caught up in trying to attain more?
- C. Make your aim a righteous character rather than earthly outcomes.
 21. We can expect life to be a ladder by which we can climb to the top.
 22. It is more accurate, in light of Ecclesiastes, to view it as a merry-go-round.
 23. It is more healthy to accept the fact that the same old problems and challenges will come our way and the goal in life is not surpassing them but in facing them each time with a righteous character.

Conclusion

- I. These truths can certainly strike a chord in someone's heart who is currently feeling the weight of a loss or tragedy.
- II. Yet, even those who are "riding high" can benefit - Eccl. 2:10-11.
 - A. Never have there been in history more people enjoying themselves more than in modern American culture.
 - B. Never has there been a society of people with the tools and opportunities to find meaning and fulfillment in life under the sun.
 - C. And never have people been more empty on the inside.
- III. Ecclesiastes is as fresh today as the moment that the writer lifted his writing instrument from the paper.
 - E. The book's shocking realism is the first step in waking up.
 - F. The underlying hope found in it and the rest of the Bible is man's only hope.

Phillip Mullins
925 Glade Mill Dr.
Kingsport, TN 37663
(423) 239-7313 or 239-3979
pgmullins@juno.com

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