

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 1

It is essential to begin the study of Ecclesiastes by reading 1 Kings 11. At the beginning of Solomon's reign we read in 1 Kings 3.1 that "Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David (1 Kings 3.1). And in verse 3 we read that "Solomon loved the LORD." Here is a believer whose clinging sin was the love of women, many women and the acceptance of their gods. The acceptance of their gods brought with it the acceptance of their norms and culture. There were catastrophic results for the nation because of Solomon's sin; and sorrow in his own life. About 600 years later, Nehemiah could say, to justify his action of contending with mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13. 26), "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin."

In 1 Kings 11.39 it is written, "I will for this (for the sake of God's promise to David of the Messiah of David's seed) afflict the seed of David, but not for ever."

Solomon personally was afflicted, but not for ever. The Lord's people, His seed, are afflicted for their indwelling sin, but not for ever. The word translated Preacher in the Hebrew means "gathered" or "gatherer" and suggests that here is a man who has repented and who is gathering others around him to teach them repentance and restoration, in the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the Greek the word translated Preacher is Ecclesiastes. The word "ecclesia" comes from a word which means the calling of an assembly. The New Testament word for church is ecclesia. It is an assembling of those called out from the world. A member of such an assembly was, in Greek days, called an ecclesiastes. It is used here in the sense of the spokesman of such a gathering.

We are left in no doubt as to the author of this inspired book. It is Solomon, for no other son of David was king. Its place lies between the wisdom of Christ which was given him, and therefore given to the church, in accordance with 1 Kings 3. 9-12, the first example of the exercising of this wisdom being found at 1 Kings 3.16-28. Like all things it looks easy when you know how but couldn't be exercised without the Spirit of the Lord. Let us ever pray for the Saviour's wisdom. Its place lies between the wisdom of Christ exercised in faith and in the course of life's duties. Then comes Ecclesiastes which represents the thoughts of a backsliding state. It is a backsliding state, for we know that Solomon loved the Lord, and was loved by Him (1 Kings 3.3; 2 Samuel 12.24,25). Then comes Song of Solomon which, even if it had been

written earlier, has been placed where it is by the Holy Spirit to declare the love between the Saviour and His people. The sequence then of these works of Solomon is firstly the wisdom that is to be had in Christ; then, secondly, the experience of backsliding (which would also resonate, when declared, with unbelievers coming under the sound of the gospel); and thirdly the love of a believer for the Saviour when restored and the Saviour's unceasing love for him/her.

Ecclesiastes is probably just one sermon with its text 1.2 "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" and its conclusion at 12.13,14-15, "let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter."

1.2. The expression "vanity of vanities" is a way of expressing the highest (perhaps one should say lowest) degree of vanity while at the same time implying the logical conclusion of that to which it tends. The word means not so much "vanity" as we would now use the word in the sense of "showing off"; though the expression is derived from the basic sense of emptiness, because it means a vaunting of that which is not backed up by reality or because no reality lies behind it. So it means "empty" and "emptiness." "Pointless," "without purpose." "Pointless" gets the sense well for that is how much of life seems if there is no sense of destiny or purpose to one who has no faith or has fallen away, however temporarily, from that faith.

What a strange thing for a preacher to affirm! We are not to understand him preaching while he is still in a state of backsliding, for that would draw others after him. His purpose, as a repentant sinner returning to the fold, is to redeem others who have been in their own way through a like experience. And he reaches out to any others today whose worldliness and grief has overwhelmed them and at the end come back to haunt them. Turn to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

All is not vanity. Though a cynical, world weary sinner might feel it to be so, even such need to be plucked as brands from the burning (Jude 23).

It would be good at this stage to have in our minds some other texts on vanity. In Genesis 3 (the word is not used) but "when the woman saw that the tree was...to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof...and the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Such wisdom! Here is the origin of shame. The world's wisdom, our natural bent, leads to a wisdom that is no wisdom and does not satisfy and oftentimes leads to shame.

David declared of his opponent, "If he come to see me, he speaketh vanity" (Psalm 41.6). Thus will the words be with which we are opposed for the sake of the gospel. It is not too much to think that Solomon would have been influenced by the psalms of his father David. David also writes, "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah. Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity. Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them" (Psalm 62. 8-10).

"Therefore their days did he consume in vanity, and their years in trouble" (Psalm 78.33).

"The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death" (Proverbs 21.6).

“For the creature (that is, creation) was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope” (Romans 8.20). There is a certain pointlessness in all of nature’s cycle which has been enjoined by the Creator because of man’s sin. But nature will one day be consummated (Romans 8.21).

1.3. Here is the opening point of the sermon. The preacher asks his hearers to consider, “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” One can imagine that many with no God, or who had lived as if there were no God, would find themselves nodding assent. Solomon had himself taught, (Proverbs 14.23) “in all labour there is profit” but it doesn’t always seem like that in moments of weariness, stress and hardship. We know we earn our living by it but then what is the point of living? So it is possible our thoughts may run. Without faith in Christ, weariness may turn to failure of nerve and giving up; stress to breakdown; hardship to cynicism. Even where there is faith it may become clouded (whether through sinfulness or not) and cause us to swerve aside from our faith. The gospel encourages us to “lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Hebrews 12.12).

1.4. Not only is this a very frequent theme of scripture it is also how we think from time to time. It is a frequent theme of scripture from which we conclude that it an essential step in the reasoning which may turn our hearts under the influence of the Holy Spirit to think on eternal things. When prophetically in Isaiah John the Baptist asks what is to be the opening theme of his gospel message he is told to cry, “All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40. 6-8). This is the beginning of the gospel. Peter quotes this passage. “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Peter 1. 24-25).

“Wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish. This their way is their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings” (Psalm 49. 10-13).

To any given generation the earth may appear to abide for ever. But it is not so. “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3.10). However, John could write, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away” (Revelation 21.1). It is, however, a powerful incentive to turn for salvation to the Lord Jesus Christ when we apprehend how rapidly our lives are drawing to their conclusion.

1.5. The daily input of the Lord into this world by means of the sun is enormous. What appears to be its daily cycle, but is actually the cycle of the earth, has never ceased since its creation in thousands of years. We must not be lulled into a sense of boredom because a thing is repeated, for the sun’s beneficent influence, for example, is unquantifiable in its repetition. Nor must we react to habitual sequences with dullness, because that leads to carelessness and

ultimately to the sort of unbelief expressed in the words, “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Peter 3.4) concerning which Peter argues that it clearly is not the case and that such reasoning stems from the desire to reject God, for they are willingly ignorant, they take no steps to counteract this belief which is manifestly untrue.

1.6. The movements of the winds are not arbitrary as a cynic might be tempted to think but by them the Lord regulates weather systems on a short rein, on a daily basis, thereby bringing to bear small or large weather systems to bring disaster or alleviation from disaster, or anything in between, across the inhabitants of the world.

1.7. The movement of waters and their precipitation is incessant and purposeful. The sheer regularity and scale of it is beyond what we as individuals can take in and therefore we easily dismiss it as simply one of the customary things of the world. It is a regularity, but, again, it is very purposeful for the sustaining of the world as we know it. There will be no more sea in the new earth (Revelation 21.1).

1.8. Solomon builds up the power of his argument. Constant labour of any sort is tiring and exacting; sightseeing may be a craving but brings only the desire to see more; and concert going may likewise begin a pleasant enough round of passing the time. All in all it goes nowhere and gets us nowhere, save to pass the time endlessly. This is all there is to unfaith; a faith and a purpose will in some measure alleviate this way of thinking. But then it all turns on what we put our faith in. Other than the Lord Jesus Christ “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

1.9. In this verse we have one of the briefest and most famous of sayings. “There is no new thing under the sun.” In different forms and guises, in different ages and cultures, the same principles are always at work with the same results, albeit worked out in different situations and with different personnel. This is the rationale for studying history, for if we understand the reasons for the events of one age we may well understand what is happening in another. If it is our own age we may neither have the understanding to see it or the determination to avoid the unpalatable consequences which history would teach.

1.10. We see from the very first verses of scripture that this statement is true. Is light new? Does creation remain? Is temptation new? Is faith new? Is murder new? Is anger new? Is the falling of the countenance (the putting on of a long face) new? All these things and many others which abide may be found in the first four chapters of Genesis.

1.11. History may record some things, as may unconsulted archives, but generally speaking we as individuals are largely ignorant of those who have lived in our towns before us, of family members of generations ago and even the retirement scenes of formerly prominent individuals with whose names we were familiar in their heyday.

Who will remember us? It is pointless, as Psalm 49.11-13 suggests, even to attempt to leave something memorable behind us for the sake of our own benefit. No, what abides is that God not only remembers us, but will raise up believers in Christ to live for ever with Him. Every time we read a list in scripture it reminds us that what are simply names to us are people

known to God in every aspect of their lives, and in many cases are still alive with Him in the glory, for all live unto Him (Luke 20.38). When Aaron bore the names of the 12 tribes before the Lord (Exodus 28.12) it was to teach the people that believers are never forgotten by our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, even God, the Three-in One Himself.

1.12-13. There did not appear to be any weariness associated in the giving of the gift of wisdom or the exercising of it in 1 Kings 3. 11-28 any more than there was in the speaking in tongues (languages which had never been laboriously learned) at Pentecost (Acts 2. 1-11). However, it is true that even aptitudes which we have must be improved with difficulty and practice or study. But to speak of “sore travail” suggests that this study is done in an unbelieving way, with no rejoicing in heart that the Lord should have bestowed such insight and such a world of things to be discovered. It reveals the way of the world, not the walk of faith.

If a man would not work neither should he eat (2 Thessalonians 3.10). Work is not always available, but if a man will not work neither let him eat. Nevertheless it will help to keep ourselves in the love of God as we refresh our attitudes to our work by reading with delight Matthew 6. 24-34. There the root of our trouble with regard to our work is revealed – we serve two masters. The one by whom we are employed. And our own leisure funding. A believer is not to be doubleminded. His relaxation is legitimate, but it must always be to serve the one great end of his life, namely to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. There was an old saying, which ran, “the workman does not defraud his master when he pauses to whet his scythe.”

God hath given this sore travail (Genesis 3.17-19) and even the king is not exempt.

1.14. Not only are things vain but they are also often vexatious. They bring complexities, unfairnesses, inequalities and responsibilities for matters which are sometimes out of one’s own control. And many other things also. The spirit may be vexed by the suffering of people and animals (but read again Romans 8. 20-23), by watching loved ones in pain, by observing tragedies and living with the aftermath of accidents in the workplace or outdoors. If we do not behold, understand, acquiesce and welcome the Lord’s providences then we have no means to handle these events other than in a disbelieving way. Rather let us seek as believers to align ourselves with Paul when he wrote, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12.8-10).

1.15. Indeed, “can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (Jeremiah 13.23). But change is possible upon repentance. Nothing is impossible with God (Genesis 18.14; Jeremiah 32.17; Zechariah 8.6; Luke 1.37; Matthew 19.26. If you read all these examples, meditate on the varying circumstances in which the Lord’s power to reverse man’s situations is revealed.) Repentance may work wonderful changes; and whereas it does not always please God to alter the effects or consequences of our actions (as with Solomon and the division of the kingdom) he turns the wrath of man to praise him and restrains the remainder of that wrath and the sin which caused it (Psalm 76.10); and works all things together for good to them that love Him (Romans

8.28). We should not do evil, cheaply thinking that God will put it right (for He may not) or through not caring anyway. We are certainly not to do evil that good may come (Romans 3.8).

1.16. “Communing with our own heart” is a beautiful way of expressing that with which we are all most familiar. But it must be allied in a believer with meditating on the scriptures and, more than that, doing so in the conscious presence of the Saviour and with His Spirit as tutor. To have had more wisdom than any, and yet to have thrown it away, is the height of folly. It is always imprudent to throw away something you have for something you haven’t yet obtained, on the offchance it may turn out even better. It never does. We build, if things are indeed to be better, on the foundations on what we already have that is good, not by rejecting them. Experience is much, but it is not everything. It did not prevent Solomon going off the rails, as we say.

1.17. We must be careful what we give our hearts over to. Good or bad, these things soon become uncontrollable, because “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17.9). It may start with something good and laudable; but it doesn’t take long for a heart “given over” (the expression implies abandonment, and abandonment in this realm has to be to Satan) to know madness and folly, “madness” being understood as recklessness and lack of judgment.

1.18. Christ’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30) is obtainable for each and every situation in the life of a believer. You can never have too much. But, on the other hand, “hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” and He has declared, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent” (1 Corinthians 1.18-20). The preaching of the gospel is foolishness to them that perish (1 Corinthians 1.18) but unto us who are saved, and therefore gifted with the wisdom of Christ, it is the power of God.

To be wise in some things (with the wisdom of this world) and ridiculously foolish in others (say, for example, in marital affairs) is very vexing and would appear to be a conundrum, but for the clear teaching of the scripture that the wisdom of this world is folly. Unless the Lord teach His senators wisdom (Psalm 105.22) the nations will get themselves inextricably involved in complicated financial matters and matters of warfare. The legal systems will become “legalistic;” which is to say that, in an effort to cover every eventuality, commonsense will be overruled and the law will be thought to be an ass. And so on in all the professions of life. And if church officers are not taught wisdom and seek it before every meeting they will fall into the same trap of accomplishing church business in a worldly way, assuming that the accepted way in which the world does things or thinks, or even in the way in which they previously proceeded (with guidance on that occasion most certainly from the Lord) is necessarily right on this next occasion.

Wisdom is the application of learning to given situations. In and of itself it should not present grief. Study for study’s sake is a weariness to the flesh (12.12) and much learning was wrongly perceived to have given Paul the madness with which Festus thought he was afflicted (Acts 26.24). Knowledge in and of itself should not increase sorrow. But the obtaining of it by much study may; and the realisation of the sins and sorrows of societies may. Once a person has lost faith there is no ultimate meaning in existing, no purpose to impart direction or focus to life, very little in the way of ideals to aim at and no vision to empower one’s destiny.