

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 2

2.1. The word “I” begins the first eight verses and might as well be said to begin the first thirteen. That little word “I” occurs in every verse except one in the first twenty verses. We may very easily lapse into self-will, self-centredness and selfishness without realising it. Others see that we are domineering and manipulative and it betrays itself in our manner and our speech and, though they will not tell us to our face, they find our iniquity to be hateful (Psalm 36.2). A child growing up only has for his earliest days a sense of himself and what it wants. A child needs to be taught, because of inborn sin, to think of others; but for a grown man to demonstrate these traits, and deliberately at that, is overbearing.

The way out of this impasse is through the word of God which teaches us first of all in this connection “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12.3). The next step, to bring us out of ourselves and to dethrone “me,” is “to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thessalonians 5.12-13). Those who are the centre of their own lives are often argumentative, self-opinionated concerning many matters and often critical of those who are actually leading the way in the local church and Christian service.

This is a considered, deliberately chosen, approach to life. “I said in mine heart” (2.1); “I said of laughter” (2.2); “I sought in mine heart” (2.3) and even if it were true that this was simply a short-term choice for an experiment, it has to be said that if any of us embark on such a course it is a falling away from Christ, Whose will and direction should be sought in every matter. Particularly is this a dangerous course for young people for whom experimentation may be their ruination to be regretted for ever.

Hedonism is the technical name for the pursuit of pleasure. Because we live in a predominantly hedonistic society this is a particular danger for us. Many societies down the years have been hedonistic – “there is no new thing under the sun” (1.10). Such a society is characterized by the pursuit of pleasure. Work is performed very often, that is if we are employed at all, to enable us to spend on leisure. It is not true of everybody, of course, but it is a danger that Christians must be aware of. “This also is vanity.” It is not the solution to life. It does not provide an escape. It is a cul-de-sac and at some point we will have to retrace our steps and re-think the whole matter of where our life is heading.

2.2. The appeal of the court jester was to be ridiculously and exaggeratedly funny but always with an inherent sadness, with a sense of tragedy, that engaged the affections of those who saw him. Perhaps he was employed to be a picture, without the majority realising the purpose of his presence, of where sheer pleasure leads. It does not drive away tragedy. It leaves a person emptier, a long while detached from reality, when real difficulties strike. Laughter is mad in the sense of careless, unfeeling often; a front, perhaps, lest real emotions be betrayed.

2.3. Wine probably stands here for any form of strong drink. Lonely and isolated drinking bouts destroy a person very rapidly and lead very soon to a sense that time and life are slipping away pointlessly.

A remarkable combination is described here, which many try, and which does not work ultimately though it seems to work. That is, to combine sin, maybe gross sin, maybe debilitating sin, with periods of intense normality. In Solomon's case carrying on studying wisdom while drinking freely. The one disqualifies the other eventually. The time will come when wisdom is called for and a person will not be in a fit state to impart it and may in "half-seas-over" folly even decry the circumstances of the one who needs top-level help or justice. Any combination of hidden and persistent sin and the carrying on of a "normal" life leads to a sense of hypocrisy, of double standards and dealing combined with a sense of self-loathing. "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1.8).

Societies that are bored will turn to drink. If it was in Solomon's mind to enter into their experience it brought him down to their level, whereas the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and the full-orbed living out of that faith, is designed to bring men "out of darkness and into his (Christ's) marvellous light" (1 Peter 2.9); "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26.18). "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Ephesians 5.11). This is the heart of the failure of Solomon's philosophy here.

2.4-8. We speak of "workaholics" by which we mean those who immerse themselves in their work to escape the unwelcome down-side of life. Though the work Solomon mentions here was not escapism but deliberately sought out the effect is the same. In his case he probably did not do these things himself, but organized and supervised them. Had he lived in our own age he might have commended himself for providing labour. We enjoy in the UK many stately mansions and formal gardens and parks, the work and legacy of rich landowners in their generations. These are the great ones of the earth. "So I was great" (2.9). "And my wisdom remained with me." It almost seems that Solomon is seeing how far he can go in worldliness and carnality before losing the gift of God. It introduces the theme in verse 2 "yet acquainting my heart with wisdom" and virtually closes it here. There is also the element of pride expressed in his words "more than all that were before me."

2. 10-11. Solomon now declares that the earnings from his work licensed him to purchase whatever his eyes desired. This self-confessed aberration of Solomon is corrected in the New Testament. "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2.16). This chosen way of Solomon is not of the Father, and we should not follow in his footsteps, even if in the midst of success and with money to spare. The gratification of our lusts is not the Lord's appointed way for

believers. “The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot” (Psalm 16.5). “The LORD’s portion is his people” (Deuteronomy 32.9).

Pride exacerbates success with its glory and power. “I looked on all...that my hands had wrought.” A sense of gleaming satisfaction, yet the total achievement in the midst of it all is admitted to be “vanity and vexation of spirit.” All that wealth brought no profit. Whatever the spare wealth could be spent on afforded no inner satisfaction. It could not be found anywhere. A wealthy king with access to the world’s then known resources declares that no ultimate satisfaction, other than that which was entirely fleeting, could be derived anywhere. What an admission! We do not need to “reinvent the wheel” as the saying is. Let us turn without distraction or delay to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2.12. Indeed, “what can the man do that cometh after the king?” If the king cannot obtain what his soul needs with all his resources, what can others hope to do? Well, his subjects can look elsewhere, to the Saviour.

2.13-17. Here, the inevitable cynicism of self-induced failure overwhelms the king. Whether arrived at by logic or by gut feeling it will lead to the same conclusion, “I hated life” (2.17). Life is wonderful and it is complex; but if it once occurs to us that the sum total of all that we have lived for, indeed all that we are, is to no good purpose then we will hate our lives, particularly when the pains and tragedies of life overtake us. The antidote is to turn to the Saviour. “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes...It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119.67-68,71).

In Solomon’s case he arrived at his conclusion by logic. He reasoned that whether we are wise or foolish we all die. Now is folly or good sense the means to the same end? Or, if they take divergent courses, will it amount to the same thing anyway? Yes, death. If that is the case, does it really matter to have an abundance of wisdom, or to be more clever than another and study hard? You can see the cynicism coming on like a mist enshrouding all his thinking concerning life. He is going to be thoroughly befogged.

Well Solomon is remembered. A fool may be remembered by those nearest him. But it would be a shame to be remembered only for folly and as an example to be learned from and whose manner of life is to be avoided.

Again, it would be good at this point to read Genesis 3.17-21 and think of why it is that work is enjoined by God. Originally “the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2.15). There was no toil, only delight and pleasure, attached. Toil was the resulting punishment for Adam’s disobedience and consequent fall. If the toil of work is aggravated by continuing disobedience, forsaking the promised redemption held out to Adam and through the Lord Jesus Christ to his descendants who believe, then it follows that it will be as described in verse 17:- “I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” It is the spirit that is fundamentally and ultimately troubled. It is the need of the soul that must be addressed if life’s apparent meaninglessness is to be turned to purpose, redemption, and everlasting life of an excellent quality.

2.18-21. All this is compounded by the thought that what has been hard worked for has to be left behind to others at death. There may be no time to enjoy such things. “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12.20). Read the Lord’s parable at this point in Luke 12.16-21 with His additional comments in Luke 16.22-31.

Churches that have been sound in faith and doctrine over many generations have within our lifetime lost their distinctive doctrines. They have ceased to be the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5.13). Well might their succession of former pastors reflect, if it were possible, “all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun” has been dismantled in one generation.

Despair now creeps on apace (2.20). Literally, “despair” means the loss of hope. “I went about to cause my heart to despair.” All his comings and goings; all the comings and goings of the modern world as it is written, “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (Daniel 12.4) are, without Christ, self-inflicted and self-damaging commuting through life in search of work and pleasure alike, but all, for the most part, distracting and diverting from the true well-being of faith in Christ.

Sometimes in a family an excellent standard of living has been attained with benefit for all by a wise predecessor, only for it all to be squandered in one round of licentious living. Read again Luke 15.11-32 and note how divisive to family loyalty the squanderer becomes, for the portion that remains is a smaller inheritance than it would otherwise have been and this is vanity and a great evil to the “older brother.”

2.22-23. “Rest in the night.” We all know about failure to sleep for worry. Though believers have less cause than the followers of Solomon to conclude that all is vanity, for they are inheritors of eternal life, nevertheless they feel earth’s sorrows too and may be tempted to fill those sleepless hours with vain thoughts. Paul and Silas’ “songs in the night” (Acts 16.25; Job 35.10) sprang from faith though they were in pain. God our Maker gives songs in the night to those who fix their thoughts and hopes upon the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2.24-26. Verse 24 is true provided the perspective is right. One might sit at the top of a hill and look east and north and see the pleasant sea; and look west and see the rolling country; while, if he were to look southwards, he might see industry, pollution and beggarly homes. Everything in verse 24 is absolutely correct for a believer in Christ. But the “nothing better” takes on a more subdued hue if it means that simply eating and drinking is the best that can be hoped for, good though it is within its limitations of mere survival. While it is true that “the daily round, the common task, should furnish all we ought to ask” if we are thinking about contentment; but heaven should be the aspect of our prayers.

It is a false conclusion that the sinner heaps up riches for the believer to enjoy. This world is not his home and his portion is the Lord in heaven. There is still more than a little cynical resignation here, though verses 24 and 26 bring a little brightness into an otherwise dull scene. However, there is a truth here also. Every accomplishment of mankind, whether by a believer or unbeliever, is available for later generations, believers included, to take advantage

of. Every step forward, every advancement of knowledge, may be taken up by a believer and built upon. This much is, of course, true.