

Happiness or Hopelessness?

Ecclesiastes 2

So here we are, our third instalment of Ecclesiastes. Here we have the Preacher – Solomon – looking back on his life and his conclusion was that life was pointless and everything he had done was chasing after the wind. He reminds me of Marvin the Paranoid Android from the Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Marvin was a permanently depressed robot. He had a negative view on life and everybody. He couldn't think of anything good or hopeful to say.

That's the feel that comes across from Solomon in these first two chapters. Chapter 2 generally follows chapter 1 as Solomon, the man to whom God had given a massive gift of wisdom, tells us of his search for the meaning of life. Last time it was through wisdom and foolishness.

This time he's exploring happiness by seeing what it's like to have a good time including getting drunk in the process. He describes it like this: *I thought that this might be the best way people can spend their short lives on earth.* Sounds like "Binge Britain" in the 21st century. But does that bring happiness? I guess in the short term, yes, or people wouldn't do it – but we all know the dangers of alcohol and drug-fuelled happiness.

We may be too old and too wise for that frivolity, but what about verses 9-11. Continuing on we see Solomon building his personal wealth. The picture is that he never wanted for anything. Isn't that's what most people want in our society? It's what's known as hedonism: the idea that pleasure is the sole or chief good in life and that the pursuit of it is the ideal aim of conduct. Take away God, and for many, that's what's left. It has been common idea down the millennia. The Epicurean philosophers Paul debated with on Mars Hill were hedonists.

I mentioned last Sunday that all I've heard recently is people, mostly young people, saying when they are atheists. When they are asked how they know that, they just say that science has disproved God. They are then asked what bit of science has disproved God, they are at a loss. Of course they will be at a loss because science hasn't, because science can't. Atheism is as much a belief system as theism.

But atheists have only one thing to live for if there is nothing more to life than this – that it to make the most of it. And that is what Solomon did. And his conclusion. I'll remind you of some sound bites.

15 I thought to myself, "What happens to fools is going to happen to me, too. So what have I gained from being so wise?" "Nothing," I answered, "not a thing." 16 No one remembers the wise, and no one remembers fools. In days to come, we will all be forgotten. We must all die--wise and foolish alike. 17 So life came to mean nothing to me, because everything in it had brought me nothing but trouble. It had all been useless; I had been chasing the wind.

22 You work and worry your way through life, and what do you have to show for it? 23 As long as you live, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache. Even at night your mind can't rest. It is all useless.

In his depression, the richest man in the world realised his fate was the same as a fool. In fact his wealth was acquired with worry and toil. And where did that get him? We know that the end of his reign was more fraught than the beginning with rebellion and sedition afoot. He speaks of himself as the man with wisdom. That was true at the beginning, but as I read these ponderings my reaction is: you stupid man! I probably haven't got half his wisdom and I can see his

mistake and it's very apparent. He left God out. His wisdom from God gave way to the wisdom of the world – he became a hedonist. God doesn't even get a proper reference until the end of chapter 2.

I'll come to that in a minute. Since I started looking at Ecclesiastes, I've asked myself the question; why is this depressing book in the Bible? Last time I suggested that it's there because it helps us to understand that the real truth and the real answer lies fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ and it's His death and resurrection that gives us that hope of new life, eternal life. But I'll go a stage further. I see in Ecclesiastes some very contemporary thinking. When God is left out, many people try to find their solution to life in hedonism. In fact it's so dominant in our society it sits a bit too easily with God's people. Yet we should be laying up treasure in heaven and using what God has given us in relation to our eternal hope.

One of the biggest problems in communicating the Gospel with the under 50s in particular is now so many people are un-churched. There was a report in the papers only yesterday that our society is now so ignorant about religion they can't even understand religious jokes! Not only do people dismiss God – they don't even know properly what, or who, they are dismissing. We live in a society ignorant of God. So how do we speak Good News to this generation? Here in a three and a half thousand year old book written by a failed monarch we see the hook by which we present the gospel. In the end, if hedonism is all people we have, then the conclusion has to be Solomon's: *It had all been useless; I had been chasing the wind.*

23 As long as you live, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache. Even at night your mind can't rest. It is all useless. 24 The best thing we can do is eat and drink and enjoy what we have earned.

For most of our society, living without God isn't something they think too hard about. Most people don't live purely for pleasure. They live for that which is most important in life to them: their careers, their family, their lifestyle, their holidays, or whatever. They don't bother to think too hard of how and when it will all end. People live in denial of the inevitable conclusion even to the end of their lives. But when they do get to the buffers, they have to ask the question: what's life all about? They can hit the buffers at any point in life. It's at the point, usually of change, whether dramatic or not, that they ask what it's all about. And it's at that point that many look for words of hope because they engage in Solomon thinking – what's it all about?

And it's at the end of his summary of life that Solomon at last opens the door and we see the chink of light that makes sense. It is just a chink but it's there.

And yet, I realized that even this comes from God. 25 How else could you have anything to eat or enjoy yourself at all?

He had acquired everything, then he realises that it all ultimately comes from God. It's the crunch point. He has come full circle. He asked for wisdom, he got everything, he lost focus on God and lived for himself, finds that's all pointless and then realises that actually, ultimately everything on Earth originates with the Creator.

Actually I'm glad he mentions this because I realised in preparing this that I was beginning to sound like a kill-joy; like to old preachers who looked dour and told us of the dangers of the shallowness of living for pleasure. Because that's a hypocritical thing to do. We all have pleasures in life which we enjoy – usually a combination of pleasures – family, holidays, careers,

homes, gardens, the seaside. There's nothing wrong in the fact that these things make us happy – when we realise that it is God who has given them to us to enjoy.

That's the message for us for the times when we lose focus as Solomon did. If we do things for ourselves, then it's for us and it dies with us. But as we come around the table this evening, we remember the One who gave His all for us, that our life, our hope and our expectations now reflect the God who was there before it all, made it all and who will be there long after it's gone – and it is us who He desires to share that glory with.

Colossians 1:27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

And this is the message of hope to all those people out there – atheists, hedonists, humanists or any other -ists who live without God. When they start realising the pointlessness of life denying God, we have a message that God wants them to know about Him. That God isn't someone just to know about, but who wants to know them despite who they are and the message is that for those that trust and follow Jesus, we are not just in Christ, but Christ is in us. That's how we know and have the hope of glory. And it's that source of hope we are focussing on tonight.

But Solomon leaves us with a parting shot at the end of the chapter.

26 God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to those who please him, but he makes sinners work, earning and saving, so that what they get can be given to those who please him. It is all useless. It is like chasing the wind.

This is the beginning of the chink of light in Ecclesiastes. He started the chapter looking how he may obtain happiness. He ends it with these words: *God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to those who please him.* We can't disagree with that. True happiness, as well as wisdom and knowledge is grounded in God and we enter that in Jesus. When we seek to please God, then happiness is something that stretches into eternity. Our joys in life prepare us for all the joys of eternity. Live life in the joy and happiness that God gives us! And the hard times? We learn to be content in every situation – and we don't understand how that works until we get to a difficult situation. But the God who brings us happiness is also the God who will make a way, where there seems to be no way.

I found the end of the first sentence in verse 26 intriguing: *God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to those who please him but he makes sinners work, earning and saving, so that what they get can be given to those who please him.* That seems a strange thing to say. My initial thought is this. It is God who made the world and He remains the source of life. But He gave humans dominion over it and we have altered and adapted it as we will, sometimes beneficially, sometimes disastrously – often disastrously! But as those that seek to please God, we get all the benefits the human world gives. We get the high standard of living, the pleasures of modern life. We recognise them as being from Him, but they are things that people live and toil and strive for. They are products of a hedonistic society. Yet, we whose hope is beyond the grave: people who in Christ have the hope of glory, get all the benefit of them anyway because we can use them as part of our life that prepares us for glory.

He ends with a familiar phrase. *It is all useless. It is like chasing the wind.* To God's people, it's not useless! What does he mean? The gist here is that people strive but only people who please God ultimately benefit from it. So why bother if God is not at the centre of it? Daft! If people don't know Christ, then everything strived for in life is a waste. In Christ, everything

makes sense. Jesus said this which actually answers Solomon's questions in verses 23-25.

Matt 6:31 "So do not start worrying: 'Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?' 32 (These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. 33 Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things. (But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. NIV)

As we come around the table again this evening, let's re-affirm again the One who died and the One who is risen. He is Jesus, our Saviour, who had dealt with our sins and by faith we have become the people of God, with an eternal hope and eternal perspective.

He's the one that had brought us eternal joy. He is the One who we now realise brings us the things in life that bring us happiness. Let's recognise that and give thanks for the grace that brings us all the good things in life. In a few moments we will come in confession that so often we have not recognised the hand of God in everything good in our lives and given Him thanks. We have not seen them as a preparation for eternity.

Prayers of confession.

Let's reflect on the bits of life that don't bring us any joy at the moment. Let's ask the God who brings us eternal joy to turn the minuses in our lives into pluses. To make a way where there seems no way. To be content in every situation of life, reflecting that the present sufferings are nothing compared to the joy that is to come. There is no room for Solomon thinking. There is hope not hopelessness. We flow with the wind of the Spirit of God, we don't chase after the wind of human life.

Response prayer

As we look at the world and all it offers, let's remember to seek first the Father's kingdom and His righteousness, and God gives us everything we need (remember need, not want) whether the fruits of creation, or useful things the human race has fashioned. And let's give Him glory!

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