

“WHAT GAIN HAVE THE WORKERS FROM THEIR TOIL?”

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14; 3:1-15

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Imagine that you are in your first year at university, that you are hearing the introductory lecture in Professor Solomon’s Philosophy 101. You were warned about him, that he was a bit of a curmudgeon, that he would try to break down your faith, undermine your aspirations, belittle your achievements. He was a bit of a maverick in his field, often making the most renowned philosophers seem foolish. His books are banned in some circles, particularly among the clergy.

He closes the opening lecture with these words: “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.” Words that seem aimed directly at you: graduated at the top of your class, from a very respected family of the community, leader in your youth group, volunteer at numerous charities. You’ve been doing everything you’re supposed to do to get a head in life, to succeed. You’ve worked very hard. “All is vanity and a chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes is not a pleasant book. You will not find in it any love poetry, any comfort for those who suffer, or any promise of redemption. There are no stories of heroic figures overcoming adversity, no miraculous tales of deliverance. It is a cold, hard look at reality designed to knock the wind out of your sails. Unsurprisingly, it almost didn’t make it into the Bible.

Ecclesiastes is the sort of book you have to wrestle to the ground to wring the truth out of it. And it is filled with some hard but necessary truths. Almost certainly not written by Solomon since most scholars date it as one of the last books written from the Hebrew Scriptures several hundred years after Solomon. Its author does pretend to be Solomon because Solomon represents a time of great achievement in Israel’s history. He was reputed to be a man of vast experience, wealth, and wisdom. The writer seems to be saying that even if the Jewish people could return to the days of Solomon, it would not solve their problems. He’s writing to a people who think they have almost arrived.

And in some respects, they have. After enduring occupation by probably three different empires for over three hundred years, they have developed a faith that doesn’t need national status to survive, a faith that sustains them even through great persecution and suffering.

But the temptation to pursue wealth or independence or status must have been present. They must have been tempted to trust in their achievements, to rest on their laurels. Professor Solomon is, in my mind, writing to a privileged people.

But he isn’t writing as a prophet. There is no “thus saith the Lord,” because for this writer raised in the wisdom tradition, the mind of God is inscrutable and there is no need to call

the people to repentance. They've already internalized the law, and are striving to obey it. This is one of their achievements. His words are more cautionary than accusatory.

If we go back to the opening lecture, there are things in the Hebrew that don't really come through in the English. Vanity, in the Hebrew, is *hebel*. It's the same word as the name of Adam and Eve's son, Abel. With this word, the teacher is reminding his students that things happen in the world that shouldn't. Abel, you may recall, is the one whose offering is accepted by God. He does the right thing only to be murdered by his brother, Cain, who did not. It's not only that the righteous suffer in this world, but the wicked prosper as Cain lives out a full life under the protective mark of God.

Proverbs makes a big deal about the rewards of hard work and the consequences of sloth, but it wasn't long before some sages wrestled with the question of why this wasn't always so resulting in the book of Job. The teacher in Ecclesiastes doesn't both with explanation. He just observes that the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked are part of life. All is vanity or put another way, anyone could be an Abel.

Don't count on your privilege. Don't count on hard work achieving the result you want. All your efforts may be a chasing after wind. Given this cynicism, we are not surprised to hear the teacher urging his students to eat, drink, and be merry.

But is it cynicism? The word translated as wind here is the same word translated as "spirit" in other places. Is it less cynical to describe spiritual striving as "vanity?" Ordinarily I would say, "no, it's even more so!" Except the one thing Professor Solomon urges is striving. Even though he says striving after wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure didn't satisfy him, he recommends work. Building beautiful things, gaining power over people, acquiring wealth weren't lasting achievements, but he found pleasure in the work. "It is God's gift," he writes, "that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

In chapter five, he writes, "It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot." In chapter eight, "So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun." And in chapter nine, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with your wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might..."

Most people are familiar with chapter three. We read it often at funerals. "For everything there is a season..." It's beautiful poetry that emphasizes a basic rhythm to life: "a time to be born and a time to die." We find comfort in accepting this givenness of life. But alongside "a time to love" is "a time to hate." Preceding a "time for peace" is "a time for war." The teacher believes that no amount of striving will change this reality. But doing the work matters. It's what God gives us to do!

Jesus told the truth when he said, “The poor you will always have with you.” But he came for the poor. He strove to feed the hungry, set the oppressed free. He didn’t heal every sick person he encountered, but he didn’t let that stop him from healing some, and I like to think that he took pleasure in that work.

Ellen Davis writes this: “For all his debunking, Kohelet [the name scholars give to the writer] never dismisses joy itself as *hebel* – an absurdity, mere ephemerality... Joy is the one thing strong enough to stand up in the face of all that is disappointing, in the face of the fact that all we do achieve and value is passing away and will surely be forgotten.... One of the many seeming contradictions in this book is that Kohelet completely rejects the notion of any lasting human achievements, yet he tells us to do whatever we do with everything we’ve got. Moreover, he offers the stunning assurance, unparalleled in the Bible, ‘that already God has approved your doings’. This might be dangerous assurance if it were addressed to an audience of potential arsonists. But Kohelet is not talking to those who have cast off all restraint. Much more likely, he is speaking to people like us: extremely responsible, moderately religious folk, who are perpetually anxious to do the right thing” (pp. 112-113).

Most of our names will be lost to the world a hundred years from now. Most of us are trying to do the right thing. Most of us don’t expect to change the world. We don’t expect to end world hunger, to stop gun violence, to end all wars. But God has given us life, and in that life, there is pleasure to be found in “chasing the wind,” in following the lead of the spirit.

Professor Solomon isn’t trying to tear us down. He’d like to strip us of our illusions, to save us from striving after things that don’t satisfy; but mostly, and this is why I’m glad he made it into the Bible, he’d like you to find joy in the work and in the life that God has given you. Amen.

Resources:

Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*