

Grace for the Day

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

Ecclesiastes – Devotional (Day 1 – 7)

By Rev. Peter Eng

Day 1

Not so Special

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

A mantra today is that we are all special. "You are a unique individual, and God loves you," we are told. "Everything about you is different from the next person, be it your finger print, your voice, the way you walk, or the way you think." There is truth in that thought in the physical sense, but less so in the spiritual realm. The Bible stresses our commonality. We must take great care not to transpose physical attributes into the spiritual realm.

A man-centered religion tells us we are like gods, we will accomplish whatever we want. Solomon tells us otherwise. Many people are driven by a quest for significance. They want to be remembered. But Solomon, the teacher, tells us that the first thing we ought to know if we want to enjoy life, is to know our true status. We will not be remembered.

All creation seems to go on in a meaningless cycle. "All things are wearisome, more than one can say.... There is nothing new under the sun." The bright spark with a new idea is merely presenting another facet of the old. The 2nd wisest man (Jesus' the wisest) who walked this earth said that he was not as clever as he'd liked to think of himself! He says we are not very clever, not very significant, and will not be remembered. As much as many people do not even know the names of their grandparents, so we cannot expect our grandchildren to remember us. All that we do, to build a good name, or work at being special, ends in the grave.

In the face of such depressing thought, how do we respond? We can try to deny the reality of the narrow corridor by which our thoughts and actions are circumscribed, or we can come to terms with it. The Teacher tells us that to enjoy life, we need to know our limitations, the first of which is that we are not all that special. Unless we are brought to the point where we recognize our limitations and the futility of our efforts, we will not surrender our pride, our will, and our actions to God's sovereign control.

Thot: Man may not remember me, but God does.

Day 2**Sorrow in Wisdom**

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

"For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief."

You are an intellectual in China who understands the corruption and evil communism breeds. You have given the different political systems much thought. Together with others of like mind, you demonstrated in Tiananmen Square. Right must prevail. The truth must be made known to people, like your neighbor, who is not be very bright. He has no ideals about change or the instruments that can liberate. Come the day of the crackdown on the demonstrators by the Chinese government, T-52 tanks crushed your friends and your dreams. But your neighbor is none the worse.

When we are recruited to work in a company, we are promised the sky, but eat only dust. At first acquaintance, a date is the perfect boy or girl. Later, the wed-lock becomes a dead-lock. In addition to all the things that go wrong, life is particularly frustrating when we see that "What is crooked cannot be straightened" when "what is lacking cannot be counted." We learn many things only to find the ideals more remote than ever. The more we know, the less we like.

Without God, knowledge and wisdom reward us only with frustration. Solomon tells us that he could not find a solution to life's wrongs; perhaps we

should also recognize this reality. Life without God must choose to pretend that the troubles and failure are not there. To find sanity, the godless person has to be positive. He has to focus on the possibilities even at the expense of the realities.

There is no such escapism with the Teacher. He looks at crooked things in the eye, and says that despite the reality of all imperfections, one can still enjoy life by looking to God. Unless we first recognize that we are sinners without any hope of salvation, we will not turn to God in repentance. Similarly, unless we first look at imperfect reality, we will not look to God for his plan of how we ought to enjoy life.

Thot: Frustrations awaken our sense of dependency.

Day 3**Pleasing Myself**

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

"When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind...."

The two aspects of Solomon's life that are most talked about, are his achievements and his wives. Solomon traded extensively, built furnaces, built the Temple, had sprawling stables for his horses and chariots, and ruled a small but extremely rich country. He had a thousand wives and concubines, and every kind of entertainment available in that era.

In this passage, we see the heart of Solomon. His intellectual finesse brought him no satisfaction. He decided to revert back to the delights of the common man: wine, women, song, and power. Surely these would bring satisfaction. We are human: flesh and blood. If he could have all the pleasures of the flesh and all the pleasures of the heart through achievements, he would surely find what constituted enjoyment in life. As he experimented with these, a part of him was a spectator, watching if there was true satisfaction in all these activities. He testified, "In all this my wisdom stayed with me."

At the end of the day, he said that though there were pleasures, and reward for all he did, yet, there was something missing. All material gain and fleshly pleasures left him saying

that it was "a chasing after the wind." Despite all his achievements, he said "nothing was gained under the sun." Life was still frustrating. He was back to square one in his search for enjoyment in life.

Later, he tells us why. We fast forward to see his analysis. In Ecclesiastes 3:11, we are told that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men...." Apart from being social, physical, intellectual creatures, we are also spiritual creatures. God has given us a desire for eternity. We want to be remembered, so we do good. We have a basic desire to procreate to perpetuate ourselves, so we have children. We want to have eternal life so we repent of our sins. Unless we live this life in the light of eternity, we will find our pursuits and pleasures transient.

Thot: There is no lasting satisfaction without God.

Day 4**Forage into Folly**

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16

"Like the fool, the wise man too must die!"

There have been times in my life when I sink to a spiritual low, and ask what is the use of living a careful and disciplined life. The Lord forgive me for entertaining thoughts ignored by the carefree. Perhaps, if I were less concerned with how to live wisely, and instead, be like the rest of the world in disregarding spiritual things, I may be happier.

Have you perhaps sometimes felt that way? Many Christians tell me they feel they are always getting a raw deal because they try to obey God. Others do not live by the same rules, and we end up being losers. Solomon decided to make a foray into folly. This led to two observations.

The first observation was that wisdom is better than folly. The fool, or the person who walks in moral ignorance, is blind and blunders into destruction. The wise may have to handle more things in life, but the one who disregards spiritual matters suffers the frustration of moral blindness.

The second thought, which shocks some of us, is that both wise men and fools die. The question then arises: "What then do I gain by being wise?" Solomon is seizing the bull by the horns. Many of us may feel this way but not many will admit the thought

crossed their minds, and fewer still dare to answer this down-to-earth question. The Teacher tells us that because all end in the grave, the wise is no better!

The Teacher deals only with life on this earth. He tells us that if we set our perimeters on our earthly existence, the person who tries to be morally upright has only temporary benefit. His wisdom may help him in this life, but if this is all there is to life, he has only a marginal advantage over the fool. This is indeed true. The morally righteous, like the morally careless, die. Neither is remembered. This must force us to look beyond the dreadful emptiness on earth. Death mocks the wise and the foolish.

Thot: Unless there is life beyond, the upright life holds little meaning.

Day 5**Darkness before Dawn**

Ecclesiastes 2:17-23

"So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.... So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun."

Solomon had only one son, (in the biblical record) despite his many wives. His son Rehoboam turned out to be a greedy, mindless, spoilt brat who split the kingdom into two right after he succeeded his father. Solomon must have seen through his stupidity, and despaired. All he did in life would be handed to this bum who would probably destroy everything. His repeated complaint was, "For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it." Furthermore, "who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?"

The Teacher is summing up the first major section of the book (see outline). He shows us deep darkness before giving us the answer. He tells us that we suffer pain and grief only to acquire things that have no lasting value. Speaking in the third person, he said, "All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest."

We spend more waking hours at work than any other activity. Not only do we put in the most hours for work, we also put in our best hours for work.

Solomon challenges us to ask why we are doing it. Life is one long series of toil without satisfaction. When we try to suck the marrow of life without God, we choke on the bone.

There are too many Sunday Christians. For the rest of the week, they think and act like any other person. They do not bring their minds and their deeds under control except when they are in church. Consequently, they feel the frustration described here. Solomon believed in Yahweh. He was a wise man (skilled in life). He had many spiritual high points in his life. But when he led a carnal life, he found his mouth dry and his heart empty. Unlike his father David who lived to please God, who was after God's own heart, Solomon in all his sophistication lost sight of the life that is conditioned by the smile of God.

Thot: Only labor for God counts.

Day 6**Enjoyment in God**

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

"For without him [God] who can eat or find enjoyment?"

What does a person need to find enjoyment in life? The Teacher only states two earthly things: to have food and drink, and to have work. Food and drink, as one item, refers to our basic necessities being met, and work brings about a sense of worth. This is the reverse side of the coin in life. When we are able to see these things as from the hands of the Lord, everything takes on a different perspective.

The one who knows God intimately will find joy in the same activities that cause depression in others. Many ask how they can change their circumstances so that they will enjoy life. While it is true that some may not be in the right profession, by and large, we can say that unless a person first finds godly enjoyment in his present circumstances, he will not learn enjoyment in any situation in life.

The Teacher is not asking us to be fatalistic or to be laissez-faire in our approach to work. He is saying that joy is not conditioned by our station in life. If we will not learn to find godly enjoyment now, a change in circumstances will not make a difference. And this contentment, and enjoyment in life can be secured only

with God, "for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?"

David, Solomon's father, sought to live a life that pleased God. His son commented, "To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness...." In addition to all that, he gets what the wicked stored up for himself. The righteous live to please God, and finds everything he truly needs to enjoy life. The sinner pursues possessions, a name, pleasures, and all that people think will bring happiness. In life, he will not find the happiness he seeks, and in death, his name and all his possessions will be taken from him.

Reading Ecclesiastes can be depressing if we have chosen the path of the sinner. The Teacher dashes our hope for happiness through the things of the world. When earthly things offer no hope, we are forced to turn to God.

That: Enjoyment in life comes only when we live to please God.

Day 7**Everything Beautiful**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

"He has made everything beautiful in its time."

Functional beauty is different from aesthetic beauty. A person solving a mathematical problem comes up with the answer and thinks those are the most beautiful squiggles on earth. A salesman closes a deal, and thinks that the contract is the most beautiful thing on earth. A mechanic rectified a knotty engine problem and thinks that this contraption purring away is most lovable. These are examples of functional beauty. Aesthetic beauty is simply that which is pleasing to the eye.

We do not use the term beauty for things functional as much as we do for things decorative. But the beauty described here refers to functional beauty. God has assigned a time for every activity under the sun. These things fit into God's grand scheme. The word "beauty" is also understood as "fitting." The reason why all things are beautiful is that they fit into God's plan.

The passage tells us that God is in sovereign control over everything (3:1-8). He has assigned a lot to man that he should toil for his food (Gen 3:17-19). We set out to discover how the curse to toilsome labor can be beautiful or fitting in God's master plan for us.

We need to recognize that man is not entitled to a life of happiness. The curse on Adam and all his descendents is that we have to labor to live. Some speak of enjoyment in life as though it were a

basic human right. Our only lot is to eat by the sweat of our brow. To deny that is to deny that we are fallen and under the judgment of God.

The difference comes when a person has changed his allegiance from the world to God. Christ removed the curse of Adam in that we have eternal life through him. Life takes on new meaning because the believer knows that God has a plan that fits. And in his plan, all things work out for the good of those who love him, who are called by him. When we recognize our lot, we despair. But when we see God's benevolent plans, we find every comfort.

That: The abundant life is for the life abandoned to God's will.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.