

01-08-05a Ecclesiastes

As we begin our study of the Word of God this morning, let's take a moment at the outset to clear our minds and prepare our hearts and seek the ministry of God, the Holy Spirit, as we look together at the passage, actually passages that we're going to be studying in Ecclesiastes, shall we pray? Father, we thank you this morning once again for the opportunity that you give us on a regular basis to assemble with believers of like mind to spend time setting aside all of the cares and concerns of our daily life so that we can concentrate our attention fully on the truth of your Word that nourishes our souls, builds us up and gives us the perspective and the viewpoint of eternity and reminds us that to the extent that we're entangled in the affairs of this life, that is the extent to which we have not been able to fulfill our calling and bear the fruit that you have called us to bear. We thank you for the environment that you have provided in this country. There are so many places around the world where life is so difficult that the pursuit of spiritual things is made more difficult and people who are believers find themselves in high-pressure situations.

We generally have a great deal of freedom and a great deal of prosperity to concentrate on increasing our knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we pray this morning that our study will further that goal, that we will have a greater amount of information and understanding in our souls that can be brought forward by the Holy Spirit at the time of application, the time when we think about how to allocate our time, how to set our priorities, how to move forward in our relationships with people and our decisions, the points of departure in our circumstances. We often have options that are presented and we think of the results of those options as the basis on making the decision rather than is it pleasing in your sight, is it respectful of the priorities that you would have us observe. We pray for those who are not with us, who study with us from afar by means of tape, those who are traveling, those who are in circumstances that only you fully know, we pray that you'll be with them and that the fruit of our studies will be beneficial and will have lasting benefit, and most of all we pray that everything we do, both in our formal worship and in our meditation and our spiritual growth and our daily operation in our lives, we pray that all of these things will work together to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ both now and when He comes in His kingdom.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. For our scripture reading this morning, I'm going to depart from our usual custom.

We often go to passages that parallel or in some way intersect with the immediate content of our passage. We are just on the verge of chapter 5 in Ecclesiastes. In fact, we've entered in and seen the subject rise of making vows to God and being sure to pay them.

And there are other scriptures that address that issue, but I ran across something this week by accident. I went down to the break room to charge my coffee cup, and there was a copy of the downtown business news out on the table, and it caught my eye because there was a blurb on the front about the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, and the girls have tickets to go

there this coming Friday because they have a special session before the circus where the performers come out and talk about how it's all done. The children can go and pet some of the animals, and it's kind of a special presentation to familiarize them with the whole circus concept.

So I picked it up, and I thought, well, I'll make a copy of that and bring it home. The girls can read it, and it will give them information about what they're going to see. But as I was putting this page on the copy or on the backside of it, there was another article.

It's by a man named Dr. Chuck Ward, the little biographical blurb at the end of it says, Charles W. Ward, Ph.D., holds two earned doctorates, and he speaks and writes as one of the nation's foremost authorities on communication, interpersonal relationships, leadership, self-esteem, personal development, and motivation. So it would take two doctorates to cover all of that. From Fortune 500 companies to small business and government agencies, audiences characterize his insightful and motivating messages as helpful, entertaining, inspiring, practical, and high-end content.

And they give you his phone number if you want to schedule him for a motivational talk. But again, this is the downtown business news. This is a business newspaper aimed at people who work in businesses.

But his article is called The Heart of Business. He's got his little picture there, The Heart of Business by Dr. Chuck Ward. And the title caught my eye because it said self-esteem, freedom through forgiveness.

And I thought, well, this ought to be interesting because this is not a Christian publication, yet he is talking about freedom and forgiveness. This is what the Bible addresses itself to. So I read the article, and if you'll bear with me, I'd like to read you at least the highlights of this article.

He says, In the fight to build a healthy self-concept, forgiveness is strategically important. So right away, you know, anybody that's studied writing, that's one of my areas of expertise, you want to introduce your subject at the outset. You have just like a topic sentence for a paragraph tells you what the paragraph's going to be about.

The introductory paragraph of an article tells you what it's going to be about. So we know that he's going to talk about the importance of forgiveness, and he relates that importance to your healthy self-concept. So basically, we already know, before I go any further, that the reason Dr. Chuck Ward considers forgiveness to be important is it's for my benefit.

It's going to do something for me. I'm going to forgive others because it's important for me. It's important for my self-concept.

I would assume, even without reading any further, that my self-concept is going to suffer if I am unable to forgive. Well, before I go any further in that article, our scripture reading this morning is

coming from Colossians chapter 2. And I just want to freshen in our minds, because we studied Colossians in the not-too-distant past, this book, Colossians. We know that Colossians and the letter to the Laodiceans were written just probably within a day or two of each other.

They traveled in the same mail sack to the same region from the pen of Paul. And I'd like to just read this and get to the front of our mind the biblical concept of what forgiveness means. Paul is talking to the Colossians here in chapter 2 as it begins about the importance of his ministry and not the importance of his ministry.

What he's talking about is the great concern that he has for the people that he's writing to, both these people and the people in Laodicea. That letter has come to us titled Ephesians, but it is the Ephesian letter is actually the letter to the Laodiceans. And he says, I've got a great conflict for you and those in Laodicea and for all of those who have not seen my face in the flesh.

What is his concern? What is his goal? What does he want to accomplish? That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love. This is not the individual hearts. These are the hearts of the people as a group, that their hearts, this is interpersonal relationships, that their hearts will be knit together in love and attaining to the riches of full assurance of understanding to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ.

There's a lot you can do with that. There are separate areas of the mystery. There are things pertaining to the Father and things pertaining to Christ.

Of course, Christ is the way to the Father. Learning about Christ, you draw closer to the Father. And talking about Christ in verse 3, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So in the Father and Christ, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid. Then he tells us why he's talking about this. I say this, lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.

For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him. Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and power. So the greatest things that you can think of, the unseen powers that might be available in the world, Christ is over all of that, and you are complete in him.

We're not complete in and of ourselves. We are incomplete. We are hopeless, helpless, and useless apart from Christ.

Christ makes us complete. We are complete in him. That is a positional truth.

It becomes experiential truth to the extent that we live in him and walk in him. So right away you can see that for the believer it is relationship with Christ that enables us to be complete, that unites us to fellow believers, that accomplishes God's purpose, and gives us access to the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are found in God. In him also you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

How is it that we are relieved of the burden of sin? How is it that the defilement and the corruption is eliminated? The poison that circulates in our souls, how is that eliminated? It's in him. The Greek word for the uncircumcised is *acrobustia*. We get the English word *acrid*.

They talk about acrid smoke, this bitter, unbreathable smoke that comes off of burning plastics and things like that. I saw a thing this past week about a lady who was trying to get out of her house. Her child tried to have a chemistry experiment in the middle of his bed and set his bed on fire.

By the time she figured out what was going on, they were upstairs and they couldn't get downstairs, and the house was rapidly filling with smoke. So she tried to grab him and go downstairs and couldn't get there because his room was right next to the stairwell. So she had to go back into her room and she couldn't get any breathable air.

So she opened her window and stuck her head out to get a breath of air. When she opened the window, this just sucked oxygen into the house and the flames and the smoke just increased. She grabbed her child.

He weighed about 60 pounds at the time. She held him out the window so that he could breathe. Then she turned back around and realized that she had just made matters worse.

About this time, she heard glass exploding downstairs because the fire was spreading so badly. She thought, you know, we're going to die if we stay here. Well, she's up on the second story.

It's about 18 feet to the ground. There's concrete directly below them. Beyond the concrete was the grass.

So with the sort of superhuman strength that comes to people in times of crisis like this, she threw her son out the window and cleared the concrete and he landed on the grass. Of course, he's screaming and everything. Then she realizes that she has got to jump and follow him, which she does.

Well, your body is not built to jump and hit hard ground from 18 feet up. When she landed, she broke her leg, she broke her back, she broke her arm. The child was unhurt.

He was just, I mean, I think it bent him up a little bit, bruised him some, but he didn't break anything. But she couldn't even crawl away and the fire was so hot that they were getting cinched. So she just started screaming her head off and the neighbor heard her and realized the house was on fire, came over and kind of dragged her further away.

But it put me in mind of this acrid smoke. It's just something awful. And of course, the Jews considered the uncircumcised, this acrobustia, I won't go into all the details of the Greek word, but by circumcising that flesh, there is the strong implication of being clean, of being holy, of being sanctified and set apart.

And so when Paul talks about this circumcision, with the circumcision made without hands, putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh or the body of flesh, this flesh that corrupts, this acrid idea, this just completely unhealthy and unusable type of thing. The circumcision of Christ, where buried with him in baptism, in which you also were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And the picture of water baptism, of dying to the old and living to the new, the death he died, he died to sin, the life he lives, he lives to God.

And so this strong idea of identification with Christ. Christ is the ark of Noah that bears us away from the sinful world that is being destroyed and delivers us into ultimately the kingdom where sin is left behind and we reach ultimate sanctification. Verse 13, you being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he has made alive together with him.

The same power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that cleanses us, that liberates us from sin and all of its deleterious effects, all of the acrid results of sin. God delivers us from that with the resurrection power that brought Christ back from the dead. Having forgiven you all your trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us, and he having taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross, he has taken it out of the way.

Having disarmed principalities and powers, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. Any time Paul starts talking about this, you can see the background. In the foreground for us is our own deliverance and our own relationship with God through Christ.

But Paul, having traveled to the third heaven, having seen a lot of things that are not directly applicable to us, knows the background, that all of this is against the backdrop of what has been called the angelic conflict, angelic history, the principalities and powers. Remember in verse 10, you are complete in him who is the head of all principality and power. Whatever invisible forces you want to look at or appeal to or think about, Christ is above all of that.

And again, he says, he has disarmed them in verse 15 and made a spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. There is a victory in the realm of the angelic creation that is manifest in Christ's delivering of us. So, do not let anyone judge you in food or in drink or regarding a festival or a new moon or a sabbath which are a shadow of things to come.

The substance is of Christ. Of course, in the immediate context, there are people who are trying to drag new believers, whether Greek or Jewish, back under the law of Moses. They don't understand what the coming of Christ meant in terms of the forward progress of the plan of God.

And they're stuck in the past. They're stuck in generating their own righteousness by works. And, of course, people are going to judge you.

You don't have any control over what people think. They're going to decide that you're in the wrong. They're going to decide that you're not doing a good job in some way.

He doesn't say you're going to have to go beat them unconscious so they can't be thinking these judgmental thoughts. What does it really mean to not let anyone judge you? Same thing we've been studying in Luke. Do not let the opinions of people divert you, change you, cause you to act differently or reshuffle your priorities.

What people think doesn't count. What God thinks. Look at it from God's perspective.

The Lord Jesus Christ has come. He died on the cross. We've been united with Him.

We've been delivered with resurrection power from all of these things. Don't let yourself get tangled up in the yoke of bondage that is so far below all of the things pertaining to Christ. It's silly when you think about it to let ourselves get wrapped up in the tiny insignificant little posturings of people, their opinions, their attitudes, their frowns.

Do not let anyone judge you in food or in drink. What is this? This is how you live your life. This is what you decide to do, how you live your personal life.

Paul goes on to say that these things, the ritual requirements that people were trying to drag them back under are a shadow of things to come. The substance is of Christ. And focusing on the substance, focusing on the truth of God's Word, specifically as it pertains to the Lord Jesus Christ, because that is the link.

You remember when we studied Colossians, the Lord Jesus Christ is the link between heaven and earth. He is the mediator. He has bridged the gap.

He is both God and man. And it's only to the extent that we are related to him, both positionally and experientially, that we overcome the hopeless condition that sin puts us in. But he returns to the idea that he mentioned in verse 8. He said in 8, Beware lest anyone cheat you, defraud you.

How do they defraud you? By giving you a substitute philosophy, by giving you an empty deceit, something that is a part of the traditions of men and the basic principles of the world and not according to Christ. He returns to that in verse 18. Let no one cheat you of your reward.

If we get caught up in the traditions, in the philosophies, in these things that look substantial but are really not. And, of course, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon characterizes these as heathen, as a vapor. It's like a hologram.

It looks substantial, but if you put your hand out to touch it, it goes right through. Taking delight in humility, the worship of angels. And, of course, you can look at angels as messengers.

You get occupied with the messenger instead of the message. Or you set someone up as a harbinger of truth, as a purveyor of great inside knowledge. People all watch Oprah to see Dr. Phil.

There's another bald-headed guy. Every time they have marathon telethons on Channel 13, there's a bald-headed guy, Dave, somebody or other that comes on and has all of these great words of wisdom drawing from all of the great wisdom masters of the ages. And he'll quote the Bible one time and Confucius the next and some ancient Hindu philosopher the next.

And he just pulls from all these spirit masters that have had insight and wisdom. And, of course, to him, Jesus is just one of many wise men who had good things to say. Well, people say, wow, he's got the inside track.

There used to be a... L. Ron Hubbard had the Dianetics book, and he was a big plug-in to the great cosmic pool of wisdom. Well, people get hooked up with these great guides into the realms of philosophy, and there are people who did that in ancient times with Plato and Socrates. Intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.

And we're going to see this. One of the reasons I thought of this this morning, the link in my mind, when it talks about being vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind. Well, this... You remember the little puffer fish that are down there? They're being chased by a predator, and so they blow themselves up.

It's with water in that case. And they get big and round, and they look bigger than they really are. Well, this is all about appearances that seem real and really aren't.

If that big predator could actually get his mouth around that puffer fish and take a big chomp, all that water's going to squirt out, and he's just got a little tiny mouthful instead of a big one. But what is the means by which we wind up being this way? Well, you're not holding fast to the head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you have died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why, living in the world, do you subject yourself to regulations? Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, which all concern things which perish with the using.

This is the kind of thing Solomon has been talking about in the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes. You get wrapped up in the world, its accomplishments, its measures of success, according to the

commandments and the doctrines of men. These things have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, humility and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

And you may remember when we studied this passage, all of these things sound wise, they sound great, because our big problem is sin and corruption and the temporary vapor-like nature of this life and all of its accomplishments and all of its endeavors. And so people have philosophies and traditions, they have their ideas of what makes life worth living, what gets you past the problems. But Paul says, these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom.

It looks like it has merit and value and intrinsic good, but it is of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. Well, keep that thought in mind from Colossians 2 while I read you a little bit more from Dr. Chuck Ward. In the fight to build a healthy self-concept, forgiveness is strategically important.

You will never be able to move past the debilitating effects of the people who taught you to feel bad about yourself unless you forgive them for what they said and did or failed to say and do. How does that thought strike you? How do you react when you read that you cannot move on with your life and build a healthy, balanced self-image unless you forgive the people who caused you pain? Do you perhaps resent the fact that you will never find lasting joy and become more productive apart from forgiveness? The most common objection to forgiveness sounds like this. The people who hurt me have never even asked me to forgive them, and they certainly don't deserve it.

Why should I forgive them? That is a significant question. The magnitude of the harm could range from a critical comment to a wicked, reprehensible act such as rape or incest. Why should you forgive the offender in any situation? Well, if you stop right here and say, why should you forgive, what is the biblical answer to that question? First of all, we ourselves are the recipients of forgiveness.

The parables that Jesus told about the servant who was forgiven a huge debt, and then he himself had a debtor who owed him a paltry sum, and God's forgiveness is withdrawn from us if we do not forgive others. It is a Christ-like attribute. As we grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ, as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we will have the attitude of Christ, who looked down from the cross and said, Father, forgive them.

They do not know what they do. Forgiveness reflects a higher perspective of life than I didn't get what I wanted or I didn't get what I think I deserve. I got something I did not deserve.

I was wronged. I was humiliated. I was deprived.

I was hurt in some way by this person, and by golly, I want some justice. I'm not going to go on as though nothing has happened, and whether or not they even realize what they have done to me, I am justified. I'm in the right.

They're in the wrong, and we just hold on to this thing, and we can't turn loose. Well, as you may remember, we reviewed the fact that we do not have the power to turn loose of that on our own. It's just ingrained in our nature.

It goes right to our ego. It goes right to our self-image, and this guy is on the right track that, yes, to the extent that you hang on to those things, you bear a grudge, you let the sun go down on your anger, it's hurtful. The answer, he says, why should you forgive the offender? The answer is found in an understanding of the effect that forgiveness has.

The act of forgiving another person is about you and taking care of yourself. It is not about the welfare of the other person. The person who offended or harmed you may never know of your forgiveness.

That's beside the point. The issue is your emotional, mental, social, personal, and professional welfare. If you want to be healthy, you cannot afford the luxury of an unforgiving heart.

So you say, well, I'm going to do this for me. I want to not be held back. I want to not have the bad effects of an unforgiving heart, so I'm going to forgive because it does me good.

So essentially, you're going to have a selfish motive here in forgiveness. You're going to say, I am not going to... And he goes on. He says here, the word forgive in the Greek language means to let go, which it does.

When you forgive someone for what you've experienced, you let it go. And he goes on and talks about this. He says, people who forgive drop the matter so that they are free to move on to something else.

In reality, when you release the emotional hold that you have on the event, you free yourself from the stranglehold the original event has had on your emotions. People who fail to forgive are practicing a subtle form of masochism. You can cause far more pain and do far more damage to yourself than the offending person could have possibly done if you failed to forgive.

Consider the effects of an unforgiving spirit. First, you will inevitably revisit the incident from time to time. When you see the person who harmed you or when you're in circumstances similar to the ones in which you were hurt, your mind will replay the tragedy.

Each time that happens, it is as though the person who harmed you gives you a mallet and invites you to pummel yourself. He talks about Barney Rubble's little son Bam Bam and how he had a club and he says you're going to be like Bam Bam. Instead of pounding the ground, you just pound yourself every time this issue resurfaces.

Secondly, without forgiveness, you maintain a mental and emotional focus on the person who harmed you. A mental and emotional focus tends to work like a visual focus. He talks about when

you're driving, you tend to drift toward the thing you look at.

If you look at a billboard and you're not careful, you wind up veering off in that direction. So he says, these things are harmful to you so you've got to forgive so that you don't wind up beating yourself over the head so that you wind up dripping off and focusing on this person and gnawing on this old bone. Well, all of these things are true.

Remember what Paul said? It has an appearance of wisdom. It's the tradition of men, the basic principles of the world. People draw these conclusions by observation.

They see how people beat themselves up, how they turn themselves in a circle and can't make any progress forward. They get literally wrapped around a mental axle on something. Well, all of this is true and this resonant truth, we know that these things can happen.

We've had this experience ourselves. We say, boy, this guy is really saying sooth here. He's telling the truth.

And so we say, that's right. I really do need to forgive. Well, what is the flaw in this whole thing? Even if you could actually achieve forgiveness and move on with your life on this basis, you read this article and you say, yeah, you know what? I really do need to forgive.

I don't want to beat myself over the head. What have you accomplished? When God at the judgment measures your efforts, why did you do what you did? Well, you know, I didn't want to make myself miserable. I didn't want to chain myself to an old corpse back here.

And so I forgave and I moved on and I didn't let that hold me back. Me, me, me. I, I, I. I did it for myself.

Do you have any gold, silver, and precious stone as a result of that? You do not. It is just another log on the fire, a rotten termite-eaten log to add to the acrid smoke that will arise from the wood, hay, and stubble fire. Any unbeliever, and that's who's reading this downtown business news in many cases, they can say, you know, this sounds good.

This is something I can help myself with. I can better my life by turning loose of these events in the past, just not think, I'm just going to, not thinking about it anymore. I'll turn it loose.

You will find freedom, he says, to rebuild your self-esteem by releasing the hold the damaging events from the past have on you. For most of us, this means giving up the right to get even, giving up the right to punish the person, giving up the right to retaliate in any way. Often people find it helpful to write a formal contract with themselves in which they yield the right of retaliation to God.

Well, now, see, even a believer can read this and say, you know, vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. Yeah, this guy's even kind of on a scriptural track here. So you actually write this out.

You sit down, you say, I've got to turn loose of this. You get a piece of paper, you write it out. You relinquish the right of retaliation, give it to God, and commit to moving on with your life.

As with most contracts, you will want to sign and date it. When the event resurfaces in your mind, go back to the contract. Review the date, the time, and the motives that drove you to give it up and let it go.

Remind yourself that the issue is no longer revenge. Rather, it is about taking care of yourself and moving on to emotional health and maturity. So this is sort of like a therapy.

You just get out the piece of paper and you say, you know, I signed a contract. I dated it. I've let this go.

I signed it all over to God, and so this is supposed to help. To reinforce the decision to forgive, the next column in the series is going to explore the dynamics of effective personal change. Well, I can hardly wait for that one.

What is the problem here? What did Paul talk about? Forgiveness is a part of God's plan. Forgiveness ties in to relationship with Christ. There is a divine reason.

There is a divine agenda. There is a divine power that enables us. I promise you, you can write all of the paper contracts you want, and if somebody has seriously wronged you, all the pieces of paper in the world are not going to give you the power to let go.

This sounds great. It has the appearance of wisdom, but what does Paul say? It is of no value in curbing the indulgence of the flesh. These things have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion.

This is a self-imposed ritual. You're going to go get out the piece of paper every time this thing resurfaces. You signed it and dated it.

You're going to give it to God, and, well, that'll help because God's involved. No value against the indulgence of the flesh. If we are not accessing the power of God, if the power of God is not active, if we are not submitting ourselves to the plan and purpose of God, all of these things sound great, but there is really no power.

It's a puffer fish, and you're going to bite into it, and it's going to be nothing. Well, this is just one area. We tend to think about Ecclesiastes and about doing works of building houses or stuffing barns and that and saying, well, he's saying that this isn't going to last.

You die, and it all goes to someone else. You don't even know who it's going to go to. You can't see what happens to it after you're gone.

But in real life, the kinds of things that Solomon is talking about in Ecclesiastes have to do with

the forward movement in our daily converse with the world. Are we really storing up something of lasting value? Is there a prophet, a Yitron? Remember that Hebrew word, Y-I-T-R-O-N? That's what Solomon introduces the book with. I've been working, as promised, on a translation and written... It's actually going to end up being, I guess, a commentary.

I guess it'll be like a little booklet. I can't really see any other way to do it because the book is so different from what you read that even just doing a translation, if you don't explain it, if you don't show and demonstrate why this translation is more valid, why the thrust and argument and substance of the book is completely different than what it appears in your English. So that's what I'm doing.

I'm writing the whole thing out. And as I go through that, looking at the beautiful way that Solomon orchestrates this statement and this argument, it doesn't bear much resemblance to how it has been translated and viewed historically. But he starts out at the very beginning, and he says, what is the prophet? What prophet is there to a man? Remember verses chapter 1, 2, and 3? Vapor of vapors.

It's ultimately impermanent. What prophet is there to a man from all his work that he works unto the sun? Well, this is work. But what is the real work of life? You've got your job, and you've got your tasks, and you've got projects and ambitions, and you may have your life's work.

You may have your vocation or your avocation. But here's one aspect, this idea of forgiveness, of building yourself up, of, you know, I like myself, and I'm okay, you're okay. And there's been a lot of grist thrown into the middle on this down through the ages of human wisdom and human tradition.

How can I be comfortable with myself? How can I enjoy my life and not be dragged down by baggage and by other people and so forth? And you see celebrities all the time. People interview them and try to get behind the face on the movie screen. And what are you really all about? And you've obviously achieved fame, so you must know something the rest of us don't.

So give us the benefit of your wisdom. And they say, well, I'm into Scientology. I'm into this, that, and the other.

And I have found a way to just be comfortable with my fame and be comfortable with myself, and I've let my baggage go, and I overcame my drug dependency, and I got past my first four marriages. And now this fifth person that's 40 years younger than me has really brought me to a new place. Well, what is all of this about? It's all vapor.

There's a term in computers, I've mentioned this to you before, where a company will come out and say, we've got this new piece of software that's going to do everything for you. Microsoft did this several years ago. It was called Bob, of all things.

When they started coming out with Windows 95, and they said, you know, this is going to be a big change from Windows 3.1, and people really need sort of a personal assistant. They need a guide. You know how it is, if you know somebody that knows more about computers than you do, when you get stuck, you say, hey, can you come over, look over my shoulder, tell me what I'm doing wrong? And that's a valid thing to do.

Well, Microsoft thought, we can do this with software. So they wrote a program, and they called it Bob, Microsoft Bob. And this was going to be a program that would sit there on your desktop, and any time you got confused or had a question, Bob would just kind of pop up.

You can see the remnants of this in Microsoft Office. Have you ever seen Paperclip Man? Paperclip Man pops up, and he's got a little face, and he says, if you've got a problem, just ask me. That's just warmed over Microsoft Bob.

Well, when this thing was first put out, it was going to be the be-all and end-all. The phone calls to Microsoft support and the hits on their webpage would just die away because Bob was going to be the be-all and end-all of helping people run their computer. Well, all of this promise and all of this great potential, all of the hype that went behind Microsoft Bob was worse than a lead balloon.

I mean, it was like the stock market crash of 1929. Everybody hated Bob. It was cumbersome.

It didn't answer your questions. It fulfilled none of the promise that Microsoft had built it up to be. They had built it up so much that it couldn't possibly live up to expectations anyway.

And there was some inherent problems in the strategy and the implementation, but it was a complete solid rock in terms of flight. So people have come to have a term in the computer world for stuff that promises big things and it never actually comes. In some cases, it never even gets delivered.

It's called vaporware. And it's like, oh, yeah, we've built this big castle in the sky. This program is going to solve all your problems, but you never get it.

It never comes through. Well, this is what Solomon says as Kohelet. He says all of these big buildups in life, all of the things that are supposed to get you down the road and give you self-fulfillment and all of this, it's all vapor.

It's just vaporware. Where is the profit? And then, of course, he demonstrates this. He observes nature.

We saw in the first poem there in verses 4 through 11 how even nature itself illustrates the fact that things run in cycles. Life ought to be linear. You ought to go from point A to point B and arrive someplace and have something to show for the journey.

But he says, you know, it's not linear. It's circular. You just go around in circles.

Look at the water. Look at the wind. It just goes around and around, and the previous cycle is forgotten.

And again, I think about computers. I can't help it. I'm a computer guy.

I used to think always in terms of artillery. But the further I get from my life as a god of gunnery, the more I think about computers. And everybody now pretty much has a computer.

I think you've had this experience. Have you ever been typing along on something and then for whatever reason your computer locks up and you have to hit the reset button? Well, your computer goes through the very same operations it did when you first turned it on. It boots up.

You get the little here's how much RAM I have and here's my BIOS version and all that, and then it comes up starting Windows 95 or starting Windows 98. We've seen this before, right? We did that earlier in the day. But when it boots right back up and you get to your desktop, well, where's my document? What happened to that spreadsheet I was working on? Where's that 2 1/2 hours of work that I did? Well, it's gone.

There is no remembrance of former things. You went to all that work, but when you redo the cycle and get back up to where you were, in a lot of cases your stuff is gone. Well, that's what Solomon says.

There's no remembrance of former things. When the computer gets rebooted every time the sun rises, every new generation, every new season that passes in human existence, they're starting all over. They're booting their own computer, getting to their own desktop, doing their work, and when they die, the computer gets reset, and it's all forgotten.

It never gets saved to the hard drive. And his conclusion is there's no amount of time that can pass where these things are going to have any lasting imprint. And so then we saw in the next section that he conducts his own experiment.

He says, you know, I've got more power and more assets than anybody else. I'm going to see if I can break this cycle. And so starting in chapter 1, verse 12, and going on through the middle of chapter 2, he tries out all different kinds of accomplishment.

He tries out wisdom and knowledge. He tries out pleasure and satisfaction, all of these other things he never does, break the cycle and achieve anything permanent. And his conclusion, the first big conclusion in chapter 2, verses 24 through 26, there is nothing good in the man who eats and drinks and sees his soul as good in his labor.

All of this self-satisfaction, even if people do achieve forgiveness, which is doubtful because it takes divine power to truly let go of these things, and it will surface. It comes back to haunt you. It's very difficult, if it's possible at all, to really truly forgive and let go.

But even if somebody finds some weird mental construct and manages to do it, even if you see your soul as good in this work that you do, God gives the wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in his sight. There's nothing that impresses God about Chuck Ward or anybody else turning loose of the past and not bearing a grudge. Where is the good? Where is the intrinsic good that builds something that lasts, that goes beyond the setting of the sun? This is what Solomon is looking for.

Because if you are not good in God's sight, you're still a sinner. And what are you doing? All of this work and effort and freeing yourself from the entanglements of wrongs that have been done to you and so forth, you're just going to be the answer in life. You're building and collecting so that God can give to the one who is really good before him.

There is a lasting thing that God gives, and everybody else is going to be chopping cotton on the plantations of the people that are good in God's sight. Solomon says, I've got to find a way to plug in to the good that God gives, to the ability to enjoy this life and the next that God gives. If you are just satisfied with the answer of gathering and collecting, this is 2.26 of Ecclesiastes.

Remember, to the sinner he gives the answer. What's the question? Where is the prophet? There is no prophet under the sun, he says in 2.11. And if you don't start finding that that goes beyond this life, you're just going to be a pawn in the game and all of the lasting value is going to go to the one that is good before God. And he says this latter thing is heaven, it's vapor, and it is grasping for the wind, it says in the New King James.

Well, I will confess to you that I missed something on this phrase, grasping the wind, and that's what we're going to come back after the break and talk about a little bit. But if there's nothing else we get from this first excursion this morning, there is only one power that makes our life worthwhile and it's the power of God. Paul says, do not be deceived.

Don't let human tradition and wisdom, and there's a lot of it floating around in the church today, don't buy it, don't let it be a substitute. And we're going to see in our second study this morning what that really is. Let's pause here and take our break.