

01-04-29a Ecclesiastes

Let's continue our worship this morning by turning for our scripture reading to Deuteronomy chapter eight. Deuteronomy chapter eight. There is similarity in thought in this passage and in the record of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple in Second Chronicles chapter six.

We have perused Second Chronicles chapter six and noted that Solomon as he dedicated the temple in his public prayer to God reminded the people who were listening. And of course, this often happens in public prayer. Sometimes people veer way off into preaching to the listeners rather than truly talking to God.

But there's a nice balance in Solomon's prayer because he is speaking to God. But obviously, when you offer public prayer, you are also enjoining listeners to share your viewpoint and the sentiments that you express to God. And so there is a unique sort of dynamic in public prayer where it can be a teaching opportunity and a call to share the truths that are expressed in that prayer.

Well, I thought about reviewing once again Second Chronicles chapter six, but I think I'll let you do that as your own inclination may strike. What I'd like to do is take a look at the earlier exhortation, the one at the inception of Israel as a nation, its birth. And this is in the middle of quite a long section that deals with the great commandment to love the Lord your God.

And while it is the first and greatest commandment and it can be summed up in a single sentence, it can also be greatly expanded. And that expansion takes up two or three chapters in Deuteronomy. Beginning in chapter six, verse five, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.

These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children. Talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up.

Bind them on your hand, frontlets between your eyes, write them on the doorposts of your house. And there is a section of warning against forsaking these commands and disregarding these words. There is a reminder at the beginning of chapter seven that Israel is the chosen people of God.

He is going to drive out the nations that occupy the land that has been promised to Israel, that will become the land of Israel. And that they will be blessed if they are obedient to these words after this conquest takes place. And they begin to enjoy the blessings and the fruitfulness of the land.

So as you look at Deuteronomy, chapter eight. Every commandment which I command you today, you must be careful to observe so that you may live and multiply and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these 40 years in the wilderness to humble you and to test you.

To know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. So he humbled you, allowed you to hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know. So that he might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these 40 years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you. Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God to walk in his ways and to fear him.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs that flow out of valleys and hills. A land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates. A land of olive oil and honey.

A land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing. A land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.

Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments, his judgments and his statutes, which I command you today.

Lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply and your silver and your gold are multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, when your heart is lifted up and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage, who led you through that great and terrible wilderness in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water, who brought you, who brought water for you out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know that he might humble you and that he might test you to do you good in the end, then you say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth, and you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers as it is this day.

Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.

As the nations which the Lord destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the Lord your God. I find this passage fascinating not only in the light of what we're studying in Ecclesiastes, but also in our Luke study, where we have just seen Jesus talking to the crowds and reminding them of the promise of God, asking it shall be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. Which of you having a son who comes and asks him for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If he asks for an egg, will he give him a scorpion? What are the serpents and scorpions reminders of? Hardship and affliction and danger, something harmful, something that is potentially fatal.

Israel was preserved and delivered from all of these things by a loving God. They have been given great prosperity as they go into the land of Canaan. They are going to have a land where they can eat bread without scarcity, he says in verse 9, in which they will lack nothing.

A land where there is iron and copper, great natural resources. All of the people who say that iron was not valued and wasn't smelted and didn't come into general use until the time of the Philistines have to try to explain away this passage. Why would the Israelites care in 1400 BC whether or not there was iron in the hills if it was not already being used for the points of plows and for weapons and for other useful implements? This is a valued resource in verse 9. And he

says in verse 10, when you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.

I've mentioned this before whenever I come to this passage. I always think we probably say the blessing at the wrong time at the table because God says when you've eaten and are full, that's when you bless God. That's when you express your gratitude.

So probably at the end of the meal is when the prayer might be offered. Maybe we should ask God's blessing before we eat and then thank him again when we're finished. That might also be a nice way to signal the end of the meal and the time for certain ones to help clean up as opposed to people sort of sneaking away.

You know, you'd have to stay there till the final blessing was said and then would be this sudden disappearing act which many of us perfected in our youth. But he warns them and he says, beware in verse 11 that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping the commandments, judgments, and statutes. When you have eaten and are full and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them, this is the prosperity test.

You begin to say you're sated, you're satisfied with the things that you have and there's no longer an urgency. You don't have the dangers and the things that drive you to God because you realize that you're insufficient in and of yourself and we can begin to take God for granted, take the things of God for granted, begin to forget our calling, begin to forget who we are and why we're here when we are not under pressure. When the herds and flocks multiply, the silver and gold are multiplied, everything you have is multiplied in verse 13.

That can present the potential for verse 14, which is for the heart to be lifted up, to forget the Lord your God. And then there is this long reminder of why God should not be forgotten. He is the one that delivered.

Deliverance from bondage in Egypt, of course, always speaks of our eternal salvation. Feeding them with manna, humbling and testing, and to do them good in the end, the humbling and testing, the hardships they endured for 40 years in the wilderness were a purifying trial. But instead the conclusion is my power and the might of my hand has gained me this wealth.

Verse 18, you shall remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you power to get wealth so that he can fulfill his promises. He's establishing his covenant. It isn't because we are deserving.

It isn't because we have earned or merited any of the blessings that we have. It is the fulfillment of God's promise. The prosperity that we enjoy as believers in this age is because of the promises God made to his firstborn.

He is the firstborn among many brethren and we share the inheritance of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his merit. It is his righteousness that serves as the basis for everything that we enjoy.

If you by any means, verse 19, forget the Lord your God and follow other gods, this is valuing or prioritizing anything above God and it's an easy thing to do. We say, well, we don't have idols. We don't have we don't serve Baal or Ashtar or some other strange God, but we can prioritize things above God and that's the same as serving another God.

We can be in search of something other than fulfillment of our calling. And Paul in the New Testament says covetousness is idolatry. That's when you want something, you value something.

This can be anything from a hobby or a pursuit. It can be a relationship with another person. It can be a sense of accomplishment in some area of life, whether it's employment or any other arena, just puttering around the house.

You might just be consumed with pursuit of home improvement, whatever it is. And we don't ever seem to equate serving another God with what we consider to be harmless. There are people that spend the weekends waxing their car or repainting or potting plants or fixing computers or whatever it might be.

If this is the grist for our mill, if this is what motivates us to get up in the morning, we have put God in second or third or fourth place and that is serving another God. Moses says, I testify against you this day, you will surely perish. This is operational death.

This renders life fruitless. It is a withered branch that will be cut off and burned. As the nations which the Lord destroys before you, so you shall perish.

Sent unto death because you would not be obedient to the voice of the Lord, your God. It's not loss of salvation, but it is loss of opportunity. It's loss of potential.

It is cutting off of any future opportunities because of disobedience. Well, what has that to do with our study in Ecclesiastes? Let's return now to the book of Ecclesiastes where we are finishing chapter two and moving into chapter three. It has been a few weeks chronologically for us here, at least, since we have studied in this book.

And I think it is also a good time, not only for that reason, but because of where we are in the progress of Solomon's argument to review for ourselves what we have covered thus far. So I'm going to give you nine points of summary for chapters one and two. What is Ecclesiastes about? Why is Solomon telling us the things that he is telling us? What is the point? Well, point one of our review and summary, at the outset, Solomon identifies who he is.

We have the authorship of the book established, and we have the theme of the book presented. The author is Kohelet, the one who issues the call to assemble together. That is what Kohelet means.

You recall our study of that word kahal, which means to assemble or gather. It is always used of gathering people. This is a call that is issued.

Who is going to respond to the call? The author is the one who issues the call to assemble together. He is further identified as the son of David and king in Jerusalem. And you might include under this first point, we have the benefit of hindsight, there is going to be a future son of David, king in Jerusalem, who also issues a call.

And we are going to see, there is a particularly fascinating passage. I mentioned this morning that I got distracted, which is why I was running a little behind and getting set up here. Because when we get to chapter four in Ecclesiastes, something I completely was blindsided by this morning, but there is a foreshadowing or a prophetic reference to Jesus Christ.

And I just had no inkling until I was moving to and fro in the scriptures and walking up and down in them. And it just was very stunning. Oddly enough, I had already made this point that I think even chapter one, verse one foreshadows the fact that there is a son of David, king in Jerusalem, who is going to be one who assembles, who is going to call, issue a call, and there is a certain category of people who are going to respond to that call.

And who is that? What is that category? It's those who have an ear to hear, the ones who have not been blinded, who have not been deafened, who have not had their hearts grow callous. Those are the ones who ask, the ones who seek, the ones who knock on the door until it opens. So just by the title that he assumes in writing this book, Solomon implies that there is a specific audience that this book is going to appeal to and do some good for.

Our second point, the theme statement of this book is in verse two of chapter one. And rendered into plain modern English, everything in this life is ultimately impermanent, vapor of vapors, the ultimate vanishing act. The theme statement for this book, everything in this life is ultimately impermanent.

A third observation in our outline summary, this next section, verses three and following, a man's existence is limited by birth and death. This is pictured by the rising and setting sun. His efforts and the effects of his time on earth, pictured by the wind, the course that his life may take, however varied between individuals, pictured by the streams that flow to the sea.

A man's efforts and effects, the course that his life may take, is not unique and it will be repeated by others. It's verses nine through eleven. He will not make a lasting impact.

This limited existence between birth and death, no lasting effect. So to the question that is asked, this is our fourth observation, the question that is asked in verse three, what does a man gain from his labor under the sun? What profit, what Y-T-R-O-N, Y-I-T-R-O-N, what is left over when you get to the bottom of the balance sheet? God has given men an unsatisfactory answer to that question. Solomon says in verse 13, God has given men an unsatisfactory answer to the question, what does a man gain from all his labor under the sun? Man's twisted and defective condition cannot be remedied.

Verse 15, what is crooked cannot be straightened, what lacks cannot be numbered, even the best and brightest cannot solve the problem. Verse 17, applying wisdom to this problem, discerning the truth through wisdom produces frustration and sorrow, as it should. This is all under the fourth.

This is fleshing out the unsatisfactory answer. Wisdom and knowledge, the more you gain, the more you realize that the answer that God has given men to be answered with is unsatisfactory. And that's the point.

It is supposed to create the realization that there is a lack that cannot be filled. There is a twisted thing that cannot be straightened. That's the whole point.

That's why God gives men the unsatisfactory answer. And this has been recognized all down through history. Let me quote from Shakespeare's Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5, a very well-known piece of Shakespeare.

If you know anything about Macbeth, you know that the course of that whole play, this is very near the end, when he's at Dunsinane and there was a prophecy that when the woods that are far away move to Dunsinane, that's when all these bad things are going to happen. Well, Lord Seton comes in and tells Macbeth that his mother is dead. Of course, his father, the king's already dead.

He's, you know, then the ghost and so on. But you get down toward the end and Seton comes in and he says, the queen, my lord, is dead. So now Macbeth has lost both of his parents.

He says, Macbeth says, she should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.

What's he talking about? Once again, when you, anytime you attend a funeral, when you hear of the death of someone, you observe the death of someone, it always reminds us of this sunrise, sunset sort of a thing. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle, life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.

It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Well, not a thought original to Shakespeare. It is in fact the answer that God has given men ever since Adam and Eve walked out the gate of the garden.

Our fifth observation, this is from chapter 2 verses 1 through 11, you can sum it all up in one statement. Amusement, accomplishment, and acquisition are not profitable. They're not ultimately profitable.

See, this is my DTS training. I can alliterate with the best of them. Amusement, accomplishment, and acquisition are not ultimately profitable.

There is another well-known piece of literature. This is a poem. It was written by John Gillespie McGee, Jr. He was a pilot officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

He joined the RCAF in October of 1940. He was 18 years old. He went to England to fly the Spitfire aircraft.

Even before the United States went into the war, he was anxious to get into it. It was just old enough. So he went over to England and after qualifying as a pilot, he did some test piloting before he actually went into combat.

And he was piloting a Spitfire on a test flight into the stratosphere at 30,000 feet, which was an incredible height for that day. And as he flew at that altitude, he got the inspiration to later sit down and write this poem. Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.

Sunward I've climbed and joined at the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of. Wheeled and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence. Hovering there, I've chased the shouting wind along and flung my eager craft through footless hauls of air.

Up, up the long delirious burning blue. I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace, where never lark or even eagle flew. And while with silent lifting mind, I've trod the high untressed past sanctity of space, put out my hand and touched the face of God.

John McGill in action during a dogfight December 11th of 1941 at age 19. So, and this is an incredible piece of poetry from somebody of that age, but he was pursuing his dream. This was a great accomplishment to become a pilot, to be a test pilot and fly as high as any man had flown at that time.

And to the the sense of accomplishment that he had in slipping the surly bonds of earth and seeing the the great vista of the clouds and the the experience that he had, the enjoyment that he had. When you when you read this poem, when you hear it, you get the idea that there is just this unbounded freedom and exhilaration in this accomplishment. The larks and eagles have never flown.

But his life ended within a year of that experience and of that exhilaration and what's left. We have this poem, but there is a sense that that experience we can appreciate that he had it, but it doesn't transfer. It doesn't last.

It's not something you can bottle and hand to the next person. Literature and poetry are the means where people attempt to transfer and convey experience or knowledge and yet it ultimately perishes with the one who experienced it, with the one who accomplished it. And this is what Solomon is talking about.

So in our sixth observation, whether it's accomplishment or even wisdom and knowledge, though they can improve the quality of our life, they cannot by themselves enable us to escape the realities of birth and death. We can't ultimately slip the surly bonds of earth. We get in an aircraft and fly high, but you can't get past the sunset.

Your life is going to end. And even wisdom and knowledge, you're going to do better than the fool. You're not going to stumble around in the dark, but they cannot by themselves enable us to escape the physical limitations of life and death.

That's of course verse 16 of chapter 2. And in our seventh observation from these two chapters, as is often said, you can't take it with you. Verses 17 through 23 of chapter 2, whatever you accomplish, whatever you accumulate is going to be left to someone else and who knows what kind of person they're going to be. All the stress and worry is ultimately for nothing.

Solomon says in verse 23, you can worry yourself to the point of insomnia, but your level of concern isn't going to make it any more permanent. Death renders the very best of earthly efforts moot. Verses 21 and 22.

So as an eighth point, Solomon concludes that there is nothing good in simply eating and drinking and being satisfied with your efforts. Eating and drinking and that satisfaction literally from the Hebrew is to see his good soul in his work. We're talking about verse 23 of Ecclesiastes chapter 2, where after all of the grievous effort and so forth and in verse 24, he says there is nothing better for a man.

That's how most all the English translations translate it. There is nothing better than to eat and drink and for a man to tell himself that his labor is good or see good in his labor. But what it

literally says is there is nothing good in a man simply eating and drinking and to see his good soul in his work.

If you render it literally from the Hebrew, nothing good in a man eating and drinking and seeing his good soul in his work. This is what we consider to be fulfillment in life in many cases, isn't it? Is that we we did well. We gave it a hundred percent.

Listen to what is said about celebrities when they pass away or at ceremonies that honor particular individuals for their life's work. You have these life achievement Oscars and people going into the hall of fame and one thing and another various endeavors in life. And they always talk about oh, they just they put themselves into it.

They gave it everything they had they 110 and so forth to see your good soul in your work. Well, Solomon says there is nothing good in this for a man to eat and drink and to see his good soul in his work. This too, he says in verse 24 is from the hand of God.

This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. Well, he says also is from the hand of God. Well, when did we have a reference to God giving something previously? It's back in chapter 1 verse 13 when God has given this unsatisfactory answer, this grievous answer for men to be answered with.

Well, the idea that death renders all your efforts moot and that simply eating and drinking and telling yourself that your labor is good, finding your good soul in your work. This is also from the hand of God. This is something God has given.

And then verse 25, and this is where we will pick up this morning says that who can eat and who can have enjoyment without him in the New American Standard. Some other, there's a split, half the English translation say who can eat and who can have enjoyment more than I. And then some of the others get interpretive and they say without God and they're trying to make a theological point, but it doesn't make a reference to God in verse 25, who can eat and who can have enjoyment more than I is the correct rendition there. So Solomon says if you want to talk about somebody who knows about eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in their work, I've gone to the max.

I've pegged the meter. There's nobody that has done this more than me. So when I tell you there's no good in it, I'm an authority.

So when we finish for chapter 2 here and you go on verse 26 says for to a person who is good in his sight, he has given, this is God, he has given wisdom and knowledge and joy while to the sinner he has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind or this too is impermanent and chasing the wind. The point, and this is our ninth observation out of these first two chapters, is that wisdom and knowledge by themselves, while they might improve the quality of your brief life under the sun, they don't ultimately produce something of lasting value.

That's what we saw in our sixth observation up in chapter 2 verse 16. But notice the difference here. There is a slight difference in verse 26.

To a person who is good in his sight, God has given wisdom and knowledge and what else? Joy. Instead of wisdom and knowledge producing frustration, producing this unsatisfactory answer

that men are answered with, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to someone who is good in his sight. So this is the first time that Solomon begins to pull the curtain aside to show us the answer that he's going to work toward and that he's going to describe and illustrate in the remainder of the book.

He's presented the problem of impermanence and the more you know, the more you realize how ultimately impermanent everything in this life is. And he says, I went through all these different investigations and even wisdom and knowledge, the more you have, the more it shows you that you're trapped. You can't take it with you.

Death renders all of your earthly efforts moot. And this is by God's design. This is from God's hand.

This is the answer that God has given man and you're supposed to be frustrated by this because what does it do? It makes you look beyond the sun. You have to look for the answer somewhere other than under the sun. You have to look to God and that's the point.

God has given men a grievous answer, a frustrating answer. You're supposed to realize that this life is ultimately meaningless if everything in terms of accomplishment and merit is confined under the sun. You ought to be frustrated by that.

You ought to be dissatisfied with that. You ought to be unhappy with that answer. That's the way God designed it.

You're supposed to come to the conclusion that there's got to be more than this. Even if you enjoy your work, even if you are able to eat and to drink and find good in your labor, it's ultimately sort of ashes in the mouth apart from God and that's the point. You're supposed to come to that conclusion.

So God gives, and this is our ninth observation, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to the one who pleases him. The impermanence and the chasing of the wind is the lot of the sinner, the one who does not please God. To the one who is good in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

But to the sinner, he gives the task, actually the answer. This is the same word we had before, this grievous answer. You're going to get a different answer.

You're going to get the wisdom, knowledge, and joy. That's one kind of answer to this problem. The other answer is gathering and collecting so that you can give to the one who is good in God's sight.

There is going to be a material inheritance for the ones who are good in God's sight. And to be the worker bee that gathers that up and creates the inheritance but doesn't get to enjoy it, that is emptiness, that is chasing the wind, that is impermanence. All of your efforts are going to be impermanent.

You're going to have wisdom and knowledge and joy if you please God. Now you may think, well, that seems a bit of a stretch, seems a bit thin. I want to take a look at this idea of eating and drinking in verse 24.

Because any English translation you go to will translate this. There's nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and see good in his labor. And that does violence to the Hebrew because the sign of the direct object is on soul.

The verb is ra'a, to see, and right after to see is tov. But it actually says to see et neshama, or I'm sorry, not shama, it is the word for soul. Let me just read that to you here straight out of the Hebrew.

There is no good for a man to eat and to drink and to see his soul good in his work. To see his soul good in his work. Et is the sign of the direct object and it's on the word soul.

What he sees is his soul or his good soul, his nefesh, it's the word I slipped out of my memory there. Nefesh. It is a nefesh tov, a good soul.

No good for a man to eat and to drink and to see his good soul in his labor. This also is impermanent and a chasing of the wind. This is from the hand of God.

It is from the Yad Elohim. So what's the point here? Well, this eating and drinking and labor, these three concepts are grouped several times in Ecclesiastes. Look a few pages ahead, we'll get here in detail, but turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 5. Well, you know what? We don't have time to turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 5. It's time for us to pause and take our break.

But if we stopped at this point and had to draw a conclusion, what would it be? There is a solution to this problem, but it's not under the sun. It is not from wisdom and knowledge alone. It's from God.

Pleasing God is the key. And that has not yet been addressed in all of Solomon's investigations. It's going to be addressed in what's coming up.

We know what does please God. And as we view our lives and view our accomplishments, the question is, do they please God? Let's pause here and take our break.