

“When Faith Turns Cynical”

Selections from Ecclesiastes

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“Everything is meaningless, completely meaningless.” Any words like that ever come out of your mouth? Like there’s nothing worth doing, nothing worth striving for, no *hope* anywhere to be found. You’ve had some disappointments and tragedies; you’ve suffered more than you think you can endure; you’re discouraged and worried about the state of the world. Once upon a time you believed that there was a God, and that he is good, but everything you’ve experienced has made you question that. You wake up in the morning, you do the things you have to do, you feel melancholy, there’s no joy in your heart, you just want to escape from it all using whatever means necessary. “Everything is meaningless,” you say to yourself, “completely meaningless.” Ever been there?

It’s actually a quote from the Bible. One of the opening verses of the book of Ecclesiastes. “Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Other translations put it like this: “perfectly pointless;” “absolute futility;” “it is all a waste of time.” Older translations use the phrase “vanity of vanities,” but that doesn’t even *begin* to capture the depth of despair and cynicism in the writer’s heart. I read the book of Ecclesiastes in three different translations this week, which was an interesting exercise; some versions try hard to make this book sound religious – when, honestly, much of it doesn’t feel religious at all. There’s not a single quote from any of the book’s twelve chapters *anywhere* in the New Testament.

And yet – the book has inspired *millions*. The novelist Thomas Wolfe said: “Of all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man’s life upon this earth – and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth.... Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.” Abraham Lincoln quoted from the book in an address to Congress during the Civil War. William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, George Bernard Shaw, and Ray Bradbury were all powerfully impacted by this book. Most of us know the book for that famous poem in chapter 3, “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven,” which was set to music half a century ago by Pete Seeger and The Byrds, but there is *so* much more to this book than just that poem.

The book tells a story. It is autobiographical. “These are the words of the Teacher, King David’s son, who ruled in Jerusalem.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) The Teacher calls himself “Qohelet,” which was rendered into Greek as “Ecclesiastes,” hence the book’s name. Some people identify Qohelet with Solomon. That’s unlikely – evidence suggests the book was written centuries later – but the

circumstances of the Teacher's life bear remarkable similarity to those of Solomon. Whoever the man was, he tells us a *remarkable* story of his search for wisdom, which ultimately left him in despair.

"I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven." (1:12-13) "I said to myself, 'Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.' So I set out to pursue everything..." (1:16-17) "I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless – like chasing the wind." (1:13-14)

"I said to myself, 'Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the "good things" in life.' But I found that this, too, was meaningless... I decided to cheer myself with wine... I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world. I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to collect the water... I bought slaves, both men and women... I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold... I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire! ... Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless – like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere." (2:1-11)

What are you chasing after? Where do you think *meaning* will be found? Accomplishments? Hard work? Property? Money? Pleasure? Sex? Qohelet the Teacher tried them all – and concluded that *none* of it filled that empty hole in the pit of his heart. What will satisfy our deepest longings, our deepest pain? Can *anything*? What if there's *nothing* here on this earth that truly can?

"So I decided to compare wisdom with foolishness and madness... Yet I saw that the wise and the foolish share the same fate. Both will die. So I said to myself, 'Since I will end up the same as the fool, what's the value of all my wisdom? This is all so meaningless!'" (2:12-16) Do you ever feel that way? That's there's ultimately *no point* to gaining wisdom, since we will end up just as dead as the fool?

"So I came to hate life because everything done here under the sun is so troubling... I gave up in despair... What do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless." (2:17-23) Ever been there? "So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can." (3:12) Ever heard that attitude before? "I also noticed that ... there is evil in the courtroom. Yes, even the courts of the law are corrupt!" (3:16) Ever come to the same conclusion? "People and animals share the same fate – both breathe and both must die. So people have no real advantage over the animals. How meaningless!" (3:19) Ever felt *that* way? "I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless. So I concluded that the dead are better off than the living. But most fortunate of all are those who are not yet born." (4:1-2) Ever felt like *that*?

There is so much cynicism in our world today, so much despair, so many people who have given up on finding joy, given up on God. They have experienced life, and have come to conclusions similar to those of the Teacher. There's no meaning to all this; it's all pointless. Life is hard, and then we die.

My gosh – do you hear what's missing? What's missing in the cynicism of the world and in this book? It's *hope*! The Teacher drones on; it's despairing, and depressing, and it mirrors the despair and depression that has seized our culture today. It's no wonder there are no quotes from this book in the New Testament; the New Testament is a book of *hope*. There's nothing *hopeful* here! I am reminded of Paul's lament in 1 Corinthians 15 about those poor souls who don't think there is any hope of eternal life: "How can some of you say, 'There's no resurrection of the dead'? If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised ... [and] our preaching is useless and ... your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, and ... those who have died in Christ are gone forever. If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else!" Paul knew people who were every bit as cynical as Qohelet – and Paul's conclusion is: *they're wrong. There IS something to hope for.* "But in fact, Christ *has* been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest.... In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ!" (1 Corinthians 15:12-22)

The fundamental problem with the Teacher's perspective is that *he's lost hope*. He has become so overwhelmed by the suffering and tragedy of this life that he is no longer able to hold onto his faith in a good and loving God. It is certainly the case that there was a *lot* of suffering and tragedy back then, just as there is now, but the *truly* wise are those who can hold that in balance with the *good* news, the constant message of the scriptures: the way things are now isn't the way things will always be. There will come a brighter day; the wolf will lie down with the lamb; those who do great evil will get their just desserts; pain and suffering and death will be no more; all of creation will be restored to its former glory. When *Eden* will return, and *Paradise* is regained. That's the message we *have* to hold on to. We need to be *so utterly convinced* of its truth that all the bad news of the world won't bring us down. If you have trouble doing that, I would encourage you to spend some time with scripture verses that give a message of hope. There are a *lot* of them. If you need a place to start, try these that inspired Handel to compose one of the greatest pieces of music ever: "Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns! The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever, King of Kings and Lord of Lords!" (Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16) Handel understood what Qohelet didn't: there will be ultimate *joy!* Ultimate *justice!* Ultimate *victory!* All the sufferings of the world, *everything* that Qohelet complained about, *vanquished, forever!* There is reason to *hope!*

He was wrong, that Teacher. He was wrong. At the very end of Ecclesiastes are a few verses written by the scribe who compiled the book: "The Teacher was considered wise, and he taught the people everything he knew. He listened carefully to many proverbs, studying and classifying them. The Teacher sought to find just the right words to express his words clearly.... But, my child, let me give you some further advice: Be careful, for writing books is endless, and much study wears you out." (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12) You can read as many books as you want, you can gain as much wisdom as you want – but without *hope* ... we are *nothing*. We *need* hope. We need *resurrection* hope.

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