

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

SI: We’re spending a few weeks looking at the book of Ecclesiastes.

I’m not preaching through the whole book, only on four selected passages.

But hopefully this study will pique your interest and you’ll read the whole thing.

INTRO: A number of years ago Allison and I went to Israel for a Holy Land tour. One evening in Jerusalem we left our hotel and walked to a popular spot with lots of outdoor cafes where Israelis and tourists gathered.

We were people-watching and we saw an American church group arrive.

They were all wearing identical t-shirts with their church name—something like Faith Baptist Church, Ft. Worth, Texas.

It turned out they were a choral group. They assembled and started singing

Christian songs with a Jewish/Israeli sound, obviously for evangelistic purpose.

They were good and you could tell people were enjoying them.

Suddenly an Israeli man with a big beard, dressed in black appeared and started shouting in Hebrew to everyone standing around or sitting in the cafes.

He shook his fists at the Baptists, stomped around, shouted, shook his fists.

We had struck up a conversation with a Jewish man from New York City who lived in Israel, so we asked him: What’s going on? What’s he saying?

He said: That man is an orthodox Jew. He’s saying:

These people are Christian missionaries. They are blaspheming God’s name.

We don’t want them here. They should leave.

Just then a feeble, elderly man with a cane got up from one of the cafe tables and hobbled over and whacked the Orthodox Jewish man with his cane.

Then he turned and started shouting to everybody in Hebrew.

So we asked the New Yorker: Now what’s happening?

He said that old man not an orthodox Jew, he’s a secular Jew.

He’s saying: We have freedom of religion in Israel and we like their singing.

The orthodox Jew tried again to stir up the crowd against the Baptists from Texas—who I am proud to say never missed a beat—but the old man hit him again and people started jeering at him so he stormed away shaking his fists.

The whole scene bothered Allison and her eyes filled with tears.

The New Yorker looked at her and said:

Get used to it lady, this is the Middle East!

I’m going to come back to this episode in a few minutes—

I think it's helpful for understanding Ecclesiastes.

But first, remember last week I told you there's no book of the Bible that Christians interpret more differently than Ecclesiastes.

Some read passages like the one we just read and say this man is either an unbelieving skeptic, or he's a depressed, cynical, backslidden believer, or perhaps he's a believer who is depicting life from an unbelieving viewpoint.

In any case, Ecclesiastes depicts life apart from God.

If you don't know God, if you don't know Christ, this is your life—meaningless.

The other interpretation, and the one I think is right, is that the author of Ecclesiastes is a believer with a deep, unshakable faith in God.

He's describing how we experience life from our finite and fallen point of view.

Life is perplexing at best, and at worst it seems meaningless and senseless.

We often have no idea why God does the things he does, allows things he allows.

It deeply troubles us when try to make sense of God's ways.

If, for example, God is just and cares about justice, why does he permit gross injustice, why does he seem so often to be indifferent to the evil men do?

Why did God put into mothers' hearts such a love for little children, and then allow so many little children to die?

Ecclesiastes gives believers a perspective for living wisely in a world that is to us perplexing, meaningless and even absurd.

This morning I want to use this passage to give you another key for understanding Ecclesiastes, and that is the way the author uses words. The way he speaks.

I think a big reason people are divided over whether the author is a believer or not depends on whether or not you understand his language.

You'll see what I mean as we dig in.

So for you note-takers, lets look at this under two points.

1. Understanding the language of Ecclesiastes
2. Speaking the language of Ecclesiastes

MP#1 Understanding the language of Ecclesiastes

We don't know who the author was. Many people think it was Solomon.

The chapter we just read in some ways seems to follow parts of Solomon's life.

But there are other details in the book that rule out Solomon, so we don't know.

What we do know is this man was a Hebrew from the ancient middle east.

He thought the way people thought back then and he spoke the way they spoke.

How did the people of the ancient middle east use words and language?

They spoke and acted in extremes.

This explains why there is so much in the Bible of what we call hyperbole.

Hyperbole is the use of exaggerated statements not meant to be taken literally.

It wasn't enough for a Hebrew person to say the enemy had a large army, he had to say they were as thick as locusts, could no more be counted than sand of seashore.

We exaggerate sometimes for effect.

What you need to understand is that for the middle eastern person back then and even today, it's not done for effect or technique.

This is the way they see and experience life—in extremes.

That story I told you about what we saw in Jerusalem illustrates that—

shouting at a crowd, making dramatic speeches and gestures, jeering at people.

The Bible talks about people tearing their clothes and putting dust in their heads.

We would never express ourselves that way, but middle eastern people still do.

Remember Lawrence of Arabia, the British colonel who lived among Arab people?

He said: Semites . . . are a people of primary colors, or rather of black and white.

Another scholar said: The Semitic people tend to think in extremes without qualification, in black and white without intervening shades of gray.

You see this Hebrew mindset all through the Bible in both Old Testament and New.

Jesus didn't say Christians should love God first, others second, themselves last.

He said you have to hate your parents and own life if you want to be my disciple.

David doesn't say: Lord, if it's your will, please work out this situation and protect me from my enemies, he says:

Break their teeth and drag them off like sheep to be butchered.

He doesn't say: I'm feeling sad and slightly depressed, he says:

My tears have been my food day and night, my eye wastes away because of grief.

He doesn't say: I'm grateful that God answered my prayers, he says:

You have turned my mourning into dancing and awake, O harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn (and we know he danced and probably he played very loudly!)

Or what about Jeremiah? He was discouraged that the people were spiritually

shallow and weren't paying attention to his sermons—which is something other pastors and preachers have suffered from through the ages.

But how did Jeremiah respond?

Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, “A child is born to you—a son!” May that man be like the towns the LORD overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.

We would call that a bit of an overreaction.

Jeremiah said he hated his life, but he certainly didn't hate it all the time. He knew the Lord's goodness and often speaks of it.

You get the point. It was typical of the Hebrew people to use overstatement. Positive statements are used right alongside negative ones in a way that is jarring to our Western ears that are used to qualifications and nuance.

You have to get into the middle-eastern mindset to read Ecclesiastes.

Let's look at the observations the Teacher has in this chapter. There are four.

First, he observes that all people want to be happy but very few people are happy, and even good people are often sad about one thing or another.

It's absurd, but our pleasures often turn out to be the cause of pain.

The more you seek pleasure the less pleasure you enjoy.

Many people have been destroyed by things that could have been wonderful and satisfying: sex, food, wine, painkilling medication, power, fame, success, etc.

Even as believers, we continue to crave things we know won't make us happy.

The great Puritan minister Thomas Boston compared his own experience of trying to find happiness in the world to a child trying to snuggle up to a cold stepmother.

This observation causes the Teacher to say: Pleasure is meaningless.

The Teacher's second observation is that wisdom is better than foolishness, but death treats everybody pretty much the same.

As believers, of course we believe that our lives are better and our deaths are different because of God, but there really objective evidence for that?

If there is, it isn't so overwhelmingly obvious that unbelievers can actually see it and be convinced.

What we see, says the Teacher is that often fools get rich and the wise suffer troubles and they both die from the same accidents, illnesses, and old age and are eventually forgotten.

He calls this observation about life and death not just meaningless he says it's grievous to him—it actually causes him pain.

The Teacher's third observation is the remarkable ability human beings have to build, make, and accomplish things—from the pyramids to space travel.

It's a demonstration of mankind's godlike nature.

But after all these achievements, human society is still a mess. And on a personal level, no matter how much you accomplish, you have no guarantee the next generation will not waste everything you've worked for.

The best educated population in Europe elected Adolph Hitler.

The wealthiest and most powerful country in the history of mankind, the USA, is coming apart morally and spiritually, squandering our heritage.

He responds to this observation by saying it's meaningless, a great misfortune, and that it makes him hate his life and everything he has worked for.

So what's the Teacher's fourth observation?

There's such a change in outlook here that it jolts you.

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.

This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

This doesn't sound like he hates his life and hates his work and finds pleasure to be meaningless and work to be grievous to him.

He says there is genuine pleasure, satisfaction, and even joy to be found in ordinary things of life—eating, drinking, and working—and we are to accept those things from the hand of God.

Does this man have a split personality?

Then he says:

To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

But he's just said in verse 21 he said the wise man's achievements will be left behind to someone who won't appreciate them.

Here he says whatever sinners acquire in life, God will see to it that it's given to someone who is godly.

Is that a contradiction. No, both are true in their own way.

And what's important to see is that the Teacher makes no attempt to harmonize or qualify these two dramatically different outlooks on life in chapter 2.

So where does that leave us? What's the point for us?

Let me personalize chapter two.

We've tried to understand the language of Ecclesiastes, now lets try . . .

MP#2 Speaking the language of Ecclesiastes

Let's reflect on our life together as a church body through the lens of Ecclesiastes.

Christ Covenant turned 27 last month. How would you describe these years? This has been an amazingly happy, peaceful, loving, and prosperous church.

Where do we even start to talk about these things?

I looked through some church records this week and tried to figure out how many babies have been born in our church. I only got up to 2011 and counted 67.

And just think how many have been born since then!

The nursery and halls and Sunday school rooms of our church have resounded with the voices and laughter of children for almost three decades.

And speaking of the children of this church, have you noticed what has happened over the last few years? We've had children who grew up in Christ Covenant, who went away to college come back to Cullman and reconnect with this body. And many of them have brought with them wonderful spouses who are just as serious about the faith as they are.

This second generation is stepping into positions of leadership and service.

We are actually seeing before our eyes the fulfillment of those promises which speak of one generation telling the next one the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

We have an abundance of committed and sober-minded elders and deacons.

Week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade—these men meet and deliberate and consider and pray and serve.

Trust me when I tell you that there are many churches where the church officers either do their work in a perfunctory manner, or there are so few men qualified or willing to serve, that they struggle to take care of everything.

We have an abundance of leaders, excellent staff leading our youth and children.

What about this? Our beautiful building.

Where two or three are gathered, the Lord is with them, but I've been in some ugly churches that smell funny. Ours is lovely, especially on the mornings when sunlight is pouring in this eastern window.

And our excellent and lively music. It always lifts our spirits.

Our candlelight Christmas Eve service which is always magical,

Our pass the mic Thanksgiving service which is always humbling,

Our Anniversary Celebration which is always a little chaotic—

Year after year, marking the seasons of God's faithfulness.

Money, finances—we've never struggled.

We've always been able to pay our bills and give generously to missions. We're a bunch of redeemed sinners who sometimes get our feathers ruffled and sometimes rub each other the wrong way—but we've always been unified. We've seen wrongs forgiven and marriages restored and hard hearts softened and prayers answered and bodies healed. Truthfully we can say and must say that we love life in Christ Covenant! The boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places, surely we have a delightful inheritance.

And, we can also say there have been frustrations, disappointments, and heartbreak. We might not have ever used the word “hate” like Ecclesiastes does, but we've experienced things that were meaningless, grievous, and great misfortunes. There are things that darken church life that make it sometimes hard to bear.

We've talked about the children of the church, but what about those who have wandered from the faith or even rejected it outright? That's not just a sorrow to their parents, it's a sorrow to all of us and hard to understand. A Christ Covenant parent said to me just last week that he raised his children faithfully and consistently and he prayed with and for them, and why they have strayed is a painful mystery to him.

We've talked about births, but what about deaths, especially what seemed to be the untimely deaths of people who we not only loved but who were immensely gifted for ministry in our church. Why did God take away the people we needed who could have been so useful. There are holes left by death in the body that are never filled.

We've enjoyed peace, but we've had a couple hard and confusing staff situations over the years. The burden of those was mostly born by the elders and me. I spend many a night tossing and turning and of course just wishing God would offer a way out of it. In those times the grass always looks greener. We've been on the front row seat watching marriages and feeling absolutely helpless to stop divorce from happening. And we've felt the fallout from those divorces, the confusion, the raw emotion, even the potential division. Why does God allow divorce to trouble his church? It's meaningless.

And there are those times when you pour yourself into someone's life, and you have the pleasure of seeing them respond and grow, but then it all falls apart, and there aren't even any pieces left to pick up and start over. Years ago there was a family in our church, the husband and father didn't know how to work and support his family. I'm not going to say his name, but you

old-timers know who I'm talking about.

For ten years our deacons worked with this man, teaching him how to work, how to be an employee. Time and again he was fired or quit and would get in a financial bind and they never gave up on him.

Finally, they got him to a place in life and a job he could do and he liked and he was supporting his family and just then he was arrested for a sex crime that destroyed his marriage and devastated his children and sent him to prison.

And his wife and children in their pain and shame left us for another church.

Ten years of our deacons prayers and work snatched away.

Talk about meaningless. Talk about senseless.

I've used our church life as an illustration, but each of you could say the same for your individual life—your joys and pleasures, your sins, losses, and failures.

You've loved this life and hated it.

You've enjoyed it and found it disgusting.

You've wanted more of it and wanted no more of it.

It is biblical wisdom to understand this.

To face it. To anticipate it. And not to be undone by it.

It is biblical wisdom not to rejoice as if misery is not close at hand, and not to despair as if God's goodness is not yours in abundance.

That's the great lesson of this book.

When Christians don't learn it they become dishonest or bitter.

They live as if life is all roses and lavender or as if it's only miserable frustration.

Life is both in this wonderful world our heavenly Father has made for us that is also under the curse of sin.

Accept it. Take one with the other.

Enjoy what can be enjoyed and grieve and lament heartbreak when it comes.

Jesus Christ was the only perfectly wise man who ever lived.

He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and at the same time he unapologetically declared that he came to eat and drink, so much so that his enemies accused him of being a drunk and a glutton.

He knew how to weep over the misery of life and he knew how to enjoy a good meal and a glass of wine with his friends as a gift from God.

We are to follow in his footsteps.