

## **THIS IS THE WHOLE MAN.**

*"There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour" (Ecc. 2:24).*

The book of Ecclesiastes is a book for deep study and meditation. It is concerned with the age-old search for happiness and satisfaction. What is good? What is real? What is worthwhile? What is the great purpose and meaning of life? Its theme is summed up in its opening and closing verses. It begins (1:2):

*"Vanity of vanity, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity."*

And it ends (12:13):

*"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.*

*"Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."*

We note from the italics that the word *"duty"* is not in the original. The thought is really broader and deeper. Literally it says:

*"This is the whole man."*

--that is, this is everything for man—all his meaning and purpose—all his life and happiness.

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The Hebrew title is *Kohleth*. The Septuagint Greek version translated this, "Ecclesiastes," which means the same. Have we ever wondered what connection of meaning there is between "Ecclesia" and "Ecclesiastes"?

The basic meaning all through is the same: *Kohleth* Ecclesiastes--Ecclesia: "a calling out, an assembly of called out ones."

This word also has a political aspect--it means an assembly of *citizens*. Throughout the Scriptures it is used to designate the assembly of the citizens of the Holy City--called-out to be such, from the generality of the world.

Specifically, *Kohleth* or Ecclesiastes appears to designate a member of this assembly--particularly the Chief Member--its Head, or Teacher, or Leader.

So in Ecclesiastes we clearly see a very outstanding example of what Peter terms the *"Spirit of Christ in the Prophets"* (1 Pet. 1:11). This gives much more meaning to the teaching of this book.

*"Vanity of vanity, saith the Kahleth; vanity of vanities, all is vanity."*

*"What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (vs. 2-3)*

Where does it all lead to? What does it accomplish? What is the basic purpose of life? We are reminded of Jesus' words—

*"What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own life?"*

**Verses 4-11:** The Sun, the wind, the rivers, —an endless cycle, over and over, generations come and go, and are forgotten—millions upon millions—there is nothing new. In our brief hour of existence, we are but a tiny speck in the endless, apparently meaningless stream.

**Verses 12-18:** He considers knowledge and wisdom, the study of all things that exist, the endless marvels and beauties of creation. Is that the answer? — the purpose of our life? No, not of itself. Fascinating as such study is—still of itself it has no purpose or final satisfaction, This is a very important point—that we do not get side-tracked into the mere pursuit and esteeming of knowledge for its own sake:

*"Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth"(1 Cor. 8:1).*

Knowledge of itself and for itself is sterile, and caters only to pride. Truly creation is marvelous, and natural curiosity is continually delighted with its infinite variety, but such knowledge of itself—though fascinating—is lifeless and vain. Even the knowledge of the Scriptures—though this is the only important knowledge—pursued simply as knowledge, is empty and dead if it does not transform the character and purify the heart.

*"For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (v. 18).*

Knowledge and wisdom of themselves just open up the heart to a greater experience and discernment of grief and sorrow and the utter vanity of all earthly things.

**Chapter 2:1-3:** Is pleasure the answer? He said: "I will try everything—every excess of sensation, indulgence, and excitement." What did he find? It was madness and folly. It mocked him with empty disillusionment. There was no real happiness, no satisfaction.

**Verses 4-11:** I will try great accomplishments— great buildings, great enterprises, great public works, monumental labours, vast possessions, honours, power, and riches.

But (v. 11):

*"Then I looked on it all, and behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."*

He says that all through this:

*"My wisdom remained with me."*

All was done in a purposeful, calculated effort to find the true meaning and value of life. But all was vanity. So (v. 12):

*"Then I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly".*

If wisdom is sorrow, is it better to be just stupid and contented like the cattle of the field, without the capacity to wonder about life's meaning? No. That, too, is not the answer. He could clearly see, throughout it all (v. 13), that:

*"Wisdom excelleth folly as far as light excelleth darkness."*

But still (vs. 14-16), all end up the same, the wise and the fool both come to the same final end in the

grave.

*"And I said in my heart: This also is vanity ... Therefore I hated life" (vs. 15-17).*

What good is there in anything? Verses 17-23 are the expression of a complete revulsion against life itself. Nothing is worthwhile at all. It is better never to have been born. Every aspect of natural human life from the highest and most noble and most worthy right down to the lowest and most abused is alike vanity and mockery when analysed through to its final end. Have we not seen how the highest accomplishments and labour of one generation are abused and abased by the next?

Think of the wonderful inventions of the past one hundred years. Have they made man better? Is he using them for worldwide good, or for evil, selfish ends? Every development of the past one hundred years—which could have made the whole earth a practical paradise—is rather being prostituted to the superhuman effort to build up colossal means of domination and mass destruction. There is more fear and misery and oppression in the earth than ever before in all history.

How much more true and forceful are the Preacher's words in the present generation than they have ever been before! He has reached the climax of his analysis of all that is human and natural.

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Verse 24 (of ch. 2), starts a new theme. He brings God into the picture, and from here on we start to see meaning in the picture. We stand farther back for a broader view, and what has seemed to be but an endless, hopeless, meaningless repetition of futility, begins to manifest form, and order, and purpose, and development.

*"There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour."*

*"This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God."*

We must try to get the basic meaning of this, for he repeats this theme many times throughout the book. It is the underlying message -- **to rejoice in what God has provided, and to rejoice in one's labour for God**. Paul, from his dark prison cell, emphasizes this deep, basic theme of godly living throughout his message of comfort to the brethren at Philippi (4:4):

*"Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice!"*

The expression "to eat and drink" is sometimes used of thoughtless indulgence in the present, as:

*"Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."*

But it has a better and deeper meaning, which we believe is the meaning here. That meaning is a contentment and rejoicing in God for the basic simplicities of life, contrasted to pride and seeking great things. This is illustrated very clearly in God's words through Jeremiah to Jehoiakim, the wicked son of the good king Josiah (22:15):

*"Shalt thou reign, because thou closest thyself in cedar? Did not thy fattier EAT AND DRINK, and do judgment and justice, and then it was well with him... but THINE eyes and thine heart are not but for thy covetousness."*

The words of Nehemiah, too, help us to perceive the meaning of "eating and drinking" as related to contentment and rejoicing in God's goodness. He says (Neh. 8:9-10):

*"Mourn not, nor weep. . . eat the fat, and drink the sweet ... for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry, for the JOY OF THE LORD is your strength."*

This is the meaning of the first half of Ecclesiastes' simple, two-fold creed of life—contentment and rejoicing in God, because rejoicing is a mighty power for good—a mighty power for the purifying and softening and sweetening of the character. As soon as we allow the pressures and problems of the present to dislodge us from this haven of strength, we begin to flounder and sink.

*"THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH."*

An essential part of this same picture, and built upon this literal aspect of rejoicing in the basic provisions of God's goodness, is the figure of the eating and drinking of the marvelous feast of God's revealed Word and thus growing in spiritual grace and knowledge, which Job says he considered more important than his necessary food. The second half of this creed of life is equally important:

*"That he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour."*

Labour is not in itself the curse. The curse was the sorrow and hardship and handicap under which man was condemned to labour because of sin. Labour itself is good. Labour is the purpose of life. Jesus said:

*"My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (Jn. 5:17).*

Paul exhorted the brethren to (Phil. 2:12)

*"Work out your salvation."*

To be:

*"Always abounding in the work of the Lord."*

*"Workmen that need not to be ashamed."*

*"Workers together with God."*

But the Preacher's principal point is rejoicing in labour, enjoying it, thankful of the opportunity and ability of doing it. It is only the cheerful giver that God loves (2 Cor. 9:7). Anything done or given grudgingly or self-pityingly lacks the pure oil of rejoicing that was required to make a sacrifice acceptable to God. The manna in the wilderness -- the spiritual food -- had the taste of fresh oil (Num. 11:8), because God's mercies are *"new every morning"* (Lam. 3:23). A joyful recognition of God's goodness must be the spirit with which we greet each new day.

The Preacher does not define the labour, because he is just giving the general principle here, but it includes every activity of the well-ordered life, for everything that is done should be done with rejoicing as unto the Lord (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:23).

*"For God giveth to a man that is good in His sight wisdom and knowledge and joy" (v. 26).*

All good is of God. The introduction of God changes the picture from futility to rejoicing. Man can accumulate wisdom and knowledge in the natural sense of which the Preacher has spoken earlier, but only God can give it life and meaning with the great gift of joy.

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Thus he concludes chapter 2. Chapter 3 begins the great lessons of God's goodness.

*"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" (v. 1).*

What a wholesome, orderly contrast to the former gloomy picture he has given us! Here is the first great lesson for man to learn—that all God's work has wisdom, and purpose, and order, and arrangement which our puny, little finite minds cannot hope to fully comprehend, but which we must accept in faith and joy.

**Verses 1-8:** There is a time for everything. Life is not just an endless, meaningless cycle, but an orderly, purposeful arrangement. All things we see and experience—birth, death, killing, healing, weeping, laughing, loving, hating—all have their place in the purpose of Providence.

Each contributes in its own mysterious way to the accomplishment of that glorious divine assurance to God's children:

*"All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose."*

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*"Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever. Nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it" (v. 14).*

Here is a contrast between natural man's endless, ever-changing cycle of futile, perishing efforts, and the eternal, purposeful, unchanging work of God. God's plans will stand forever, and man—to be happy—must adjust himself to them.

*"God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every purpose, and for every work" (v. 17).*

This is the first mention of judgment in the book, and it adds more significance to the first part of the chapter about a time for everything. The whole book ends on the thought of judgment. Man is seen to have a responsibility for his actions. The book is about the human search for happiness and good, and the eternal facts of responsibility and judgment have a major bearing on this search. The preacher goes further than saying a man must adjust himself to the fact of an all-powerful and unalterable God, if he would seek happiness. He must also adjust his life to the equally real fact of a God who calls to account and metes out reward or punishment according to a man's actions.

Verse 18 to the end of chapter 3 emphasize another basic lesson a man must master if he is to adjust himself to reality and learn the way of life—man's oneness with the beasts in physical constitution and nature—

*"As one dieth, so dieth the other. Yea, they have all one breath (ruach: spirit)."*

*"All go to one place. All are of the dust, and ALL TURN TO DUST AGAIN" (vs. 19-20).*

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Chapter 4 treats of instances of the vanity of this present life.

**Verses 1-3:** Wrongs, injustice, and oppression. These are basic characteristics of the way of man. There is no worthwhile happiness or satisfaction to be wrought within the limits of this framework. All natural human activities not related to the divine purpose are futile and vain, like sand castles on the seashore, for the great tide of oppression and injustice and wickedness in power keeps flowing over them and sweeping them away.

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Chapter 5 contains further observations on the vanity of natural life, and the course of true wisdom.

**Verses 1-3:** The folly of much talking. A wise man will talk little and weigh all his words well, always aware of his own limitations, and God's infinite wisdom and greatness. The fool is known by his thoughtless, foolish, trivial chattering.

**Verses 4-7:** The folly of rash vows—thoughtless promises—ill considered statements. In our present dispensation the command is carried further and all vows are forbidden, but the basic principle is the same—care and thoughtfulness and restraint, instead of impetuosity and rashness—in what we say we will do. How often we speak thoughtlessly and hastily and do not carry out what we say, in dealing with children especially. This is fatal for any discipline or respect. Far better to say nothing at all, than to keep making hasty decisions, thoughtless commands, and impetuous warnings that are never carried through. All this is childish, immature, undisciplined folly in God's sight and will be called to account. *"God hath no pleasure in fools"*— and all natural reactions and spur-of-the-moment decisions are foolishness before God.

**Verses 9-17:** The folly of seeking pleasure and security and satisfaction in this world's goods.

**Verse 18:** The refrain is repeated again—Eat and drink in thankfulness, and rejoice in godly labour.

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Chapter 6 is a continuation of the theme of the vanity of the present. Great possessions, a multitudinous family, mean nothing of themselves. These are not the basic realities of life, and true success and accomplishment cannot be measured by them. For with all these things, what is the end result but death? And even while life lasts, these things give no assurance of happiness or peace. We must go much deeper for the answer to life's great purpose.

*"Better is the sight of the eye than the wandering of the desire" (v. 9).*

Happiness lies in the appreciation and quiet enjoyment of what we have—not in the restless yearning for what we have not—in casting out desire, and replacing it with rejoicing. How hard this lesson is to learn, and yet how simple it really is! Desire has never brought happiness, but only unhappiness. But contentment—an inner state of the mind beyond the control of any outside influence—is an immediate guarantee of happiness and peace. What we have—or can have freely—life itself, the assurance of immortal joy if we walk worthy, the understanding of the Scriptures, the revelation of the beauty and goodness of God, the gracious invitation to companionship and comfort and joy in Him—all this is so infinitely more valuable than anything in the world that we could desire, that if we cannot be content and happy and abundantly satisfied in this, we could never find happiness or satisfaction in anything. So the problem of happiness is entirely within ourselves—not in anything outside of us that we think we desire.

These are deep and basic facts. Ecclesiastes presents the Gospel in a different way. It shows that the way of the Truth is not only a command, an obligation, a responsibility, but that it is the only sensible way—the only way to find what all mankind is seeking—happiness, contentment, satisfaction, the

greatest good, the most lasting joy and pleasure. Ecclesiastes examines all the things men strive for—all the things they attach value to—all the things they think will bring them satisfaction—and logically traces them all through to the same final conclusion—vanity.

So the Preacher concludes chapter 6 (vs. 10-12)— and the Revised Version is a little clearer here—

*"Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago. . . ."*

(There is nothing new, nothing that has not been tried as a way of happiness and satisfaction, and all has been shown to bear the name "*vanity*").

*"And it is known what man is."*

The word here used for "*man*" is "Adam," which speaks of his frailty, his dust constitution, his end in the grave—

*"Seeing there are many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? . . ."*

*"For who knoweth what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life, which he spendeth as a shadow?"*

Who among man knows what is best? Where shall he look, for all human activity is so futile when measured in the scales of eternity?

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Chapter 7 is different in tone. It gently tells some of the things that are better. It lays down wholesome principles that point the way to the light.

*"A good name is better than precious ointment" (v. 1).*

Precious ointment was very pleasing and refreshing. It stands for all that is pleasant and enjoyable and luxurious. It speaks of comfort and honour and wealth. But a good name—a good character—is much better. A good character, purified through trial and patience, is the sweet smelling savour of a costly sacrifice unto God. The Good Name—the Name above every Name is Yahweh Elohim—The Memorial Name—the eternal purpose—God manifested in a host of mighty ones—all joyful and all glorious!

The *Koheleth* continues (v. 1):

*"The day of death is better than the day of birth."*

What a reversal of the world's views! But how irresistibly true when viewed in the light of the Scriptures! One is the beginning of trouble, trial, struggle, effort, warfare—the other is the end of all these, the accomplishment, the deliverance, the victory.

*"It Is better to go into the house of mourning than the house of feasting" (v. 2).*

Here again, how contrary to all our natural inclinations, but how clearly true when we have the wisdom and courage to face the real facts.

*"Sorrow is better than laughter" (v. 3).*

How could anyone say that? *"Sorrow is better than laughter"*! Are we not constantly exhorted to rejoice, and rejoice, and rejoice? The strange and marvellous thing is that these two apparent opposites are both beautifully true, and it is the sorrow that engenders the rejoicing. Paul, writing to the Romans of the wonderful workings of God's wisdom, speaks of the same deep truths, and borrows the very wording of Ecclesiastes when he says (8:20):

*"The creation was made subject to VANITY, by reason of Him Who hath subjected the same in hope."*

We suffer with Christ (he says—v. 17) that—in order that—we may be also glorified together. And he says that the suffering—the sorrow—the light affliction which is but for a moment—worketh for us an eternal weight of glory. Paul uses the same strange and beautiful paradox to describe his own condition and course through this evil world (2 Cor. 6: 10):

*"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."*

Here is how the sorrow is related to the rejoicing. Here is why in this present dispensation of probation, sorrow is better than laughter. It is more wholesome. It is more sound. It is more constructive—more purifying—ininitely more powerful for the development of calmness and peace and kindness and sympathy and love. So the *Koheleth* continues:

*"By the sadness of the countenance, the heart is made better."*

—And out of the heart are all the issues of life. Can we not, even now, even in our own limited experience of the reality of life—can we not of ourselves perceive the deep truth of the principle that *"Sorrow is better than laughter?"* Therefore, the heart of the wise chooses to dwell in the sobering influence of the house of mourning, but the heart of thoughtless fools is in the emptiness and shallowness and giddiness of the house of mirth.

*"The laughter of the fool is as the crackling of thorns under a pot."*

And so the *Koheleth* gives many deep words of wisdom—deep, spiritual words well worthy of all the pondering and meditation that we can give them. Every verse is a well of knowledge—a well of living waters. As we read them let us remember that they are the words of life to the Ecclesia of God—Ecclesiastes—a message to called-out ones.

And let us remember the closing words:

*"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter"*

*"Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole man."*

The full, complete, perfect man—the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ – the called-out, multitudinous Son of Man—the Yahweh-Elohim who shall bear God's Name and in whom He will be glorified for the eternal ages.

Taken from Volume 1 "Be Ye Transformed" Pages 237-247 by Bro. G. Growcott.