

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by wise king Solomon near the end of his life. In this book Solomon writes about things that he had learned during his life. He gives us wise words of advice about life.

The book opens with the words:

- 1 *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*
- 2 *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*

Well, that's an interesting way to begin. "It's all a waste of time, everything is pointless" he says. What is he talking about and why does he say it's all a waste of time?

Verse 3 helps us to understand what he's talking about by asking the question:

"What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"

So Solomon wanted to find out what profit, what benefit, a man could get from all his work and effort throughout his life.

Now, if we were running a business we would want to make a profit; we would want the income to be higher than the expenditure. If our business could not make a profit we would see it as a waste of time and effort.

Solomon says that if a man added up all the effort and work that he put into his life and then added up all the pleasure and happiness he got out of it he would realise that there was no profit. The pleasure he got would not be greater than the work he put in.

We must realise that when Solomon says "under the sun" he is talking about the natural life of all men, their day to day activities.

All men live "under the sun" and this phrase is used many times in Ecclesiastes.

There is another phrase that is used twice in the book (Ecclesiastes 7:11 and 11:7) which is about people who "see the sun". This is very different from living under the sun. It speaks about people who lift up their eyes to heaven and see the source of light – they see the sun. It is speaking about people who know the truth about God – the source of true light.

In Psalm 84:11 God is spoken of as a sun:

"For the LORD God is a sun and shield..."

Light is a symbol used of both God who is the source of light and His Son who came to show men the light of truth.

In the gospel of John at least three times Jesus calls himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12, 9:5 & 12:46).

Again in Malachi 4:2 it speaks of the return of Jesus Christ to the world and calls him "the sun of righteousness":

"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings..."

We will look at the verses where it talks about those people who see the sun later, but hopefully we should be able to see the difference between "living under the sun" and

“seeing the sun”. One is about life without God and the other about life where God is our focus. Knowing the difference between these two phrases will help us understand the book of Ecclesiastes.

So when Solomon asks “*What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?*” (1:3) he is talking about the work which men do which is not for God. So, in verse 2 of chapter 1 he says it is vanity – it’s a waste of time, because there is no profit in it.

Three times in the book Solomon asks what profit there is in man’s labour, here in chapter 1, again in chapter 3:9 and also in our reading for today, at chapter 5:16

The scriptures tell us that Solomon was a very rich and powerful ruler and could do anything he wanted and have everything he wanted. Look at what he did in chapter 2, we’ll begin in verse 4:

*4 I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:
5 I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits:
6 I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:
7 I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:
8 I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.
9 So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.
10 And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.*

So Solomon had everything and he was happy with his work – as he says in verse 10 – “*my heart rejoiced in all my labour*”. But then in verse 11, at the end of his life, he looks back on all that he had done:

*11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and **there was no profit under the sun.***

This is his final assessment of all he has achieved, he says it was a waste of time. There was no profit.

He had put in a lot of effort, and, no doubt, made his servants work hard for him, and in the end the result was not worth the effort.

I’m sure that when we look at our day to day life we will agree with Solomon. We work so that we can eat, we eat to get energy so we can work – and the cycle goes on. If we work harder we might get a bit more money and be able to buy ourselves something nice and new but still there is no profit. The extra things we get have meant we have had to work harder.

Even those that “see the sun” still live under it and experience all the frustrations and challenges it brings.

In Chapter 3 verses 1 to 8 Solomon gives a list of events that happen in life.

As we read through the list we realise that for every positive there is a negative.

In verse 2 we read that there is “*A time to be born and a time to die*” - all of the happiness that the birth of a child brings is going to be followed by a time of great sadness when he dies. The positive is cancelled out by the negative.

The list goes on: “*a time to plant*”, which is positive “*and a time to pluck up that which is planted*” which is negative; “*A time to kill*” negative, “*and a time to heal*” positive; “*a time to break down*” negative, “*and a time to build up*” positive.

So at the end of the list Solomon says in verse 9:

“What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?”

The answer, of course, is that there is no profit – the negatives have cancelled out the positives.

Coming to our reading, in Ecclesiastes 5:10, Solomon speaks about rich people or people that love riches.

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

What he says here is very true. People who love riches and wealth will never be satisfied, no matter how much they have. In fact, some people will spend so much time getting rich they won't have any time to enjoy what they have. This, he says, is vanity.

He goes on to say in verses 15 and 16:

15 As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.

16 And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?

This is true of all men, both rich and poor. All people are born with nothing and when we die we can't take anything with us. So at the end of his life all his labour and effort comes to nothing. It doesn't matter then what a person has had, has done, or has achieved.

Solomon comments on the time of death in chapter 3:18-20 where he says:

18 I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.

19 For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

20 All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Here Solomon tells us that when we die we are no better than the animals. Both man and animals die and turn into dust. Again, all our ideas, our achievements and wealth count for nothing when we die.

So Solomon's conclusion is that life "under the sun" without God is vanity – a waste of time and effort.

In contrast to this Solomon makes a comment about those who "see the sun" in Ecclesiastes 7:11

*Wisdom is good with an inheritance: and by it **there is profit to them that see the sun.***

Here he teaches that those who see the sun, those who lift up their eyes to God in heaven and His Son who is the light of the world can make a profit from their lives. He goes on in verse 12 to say:

For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it.

Here Solomon contrasts wisdom and money. He says that both can be used to help us in our natural life, but the profit we can gain by wisdom and knowledge of God, by "seeing the sun", is life everlasting. No profit is gained from worldly riches.

The person that looks to God, that "sees the sun" can gain profit from their lives because after seventy or so years of labouring under the curse it is followed, at the resurrection, by everlasting life with all the blessings that God has promised.

This is the wonderful hope that God has provided for us who look up to Him and to His Son our saviour. Unlike all the other people of the world who have no hope and will gain no profit from their labours in life we have the hope of life everlasting, free of weariness and pain and full of joy and gladness.

We come now to remember the one who has given his life so that we can have a hope beyond death. It was his resurrection from the dead that gives us the hope we have.

Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 15 when he speaks about resurrection:

*13 But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:
14 And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching **vain**, and your faith is also **vain**.*

Here Paul talks about how important the resurrection of Christ is to us. Paul points out that if Christ didn't rise then his work of preaching and our belief of it would all be a waste of time. We would be no better off than those who live their lives "under the sun" and never look up to "see the sun". He goes on in verses 17 to 19 with similar comments:

*17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is **vain**; ye are yet in your sins.
18 Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.
19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*

Without the hope of resurrection our life would have no lasting purpose, all our work would be vanity, a waste of time and effort. We would be the same as the animals who Solomon referred to in chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes. We would die and return to the dust and stay there forever.

He goes on in verse 20 to say:

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

Therefore we have hope of life!

Paul concludes this chapter with words that link us back to what we have learnt from Ecclesiastes. In verse 58 he says:

*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is **not in vain** in the Lord.*

Here Paul encourages us to be busy in the work of the Lord, in the knowledge that this work, unlike all the effort we might put into the things of this life, won't be a waste of time.

We come to consider the one who focused his whole mind upon His Father in heaven and laboured without stopping in His service. May his example encourage us in our life and the thought of His resurrection always fill us with hope.

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