

WHERE
WISDOM
IS FOUND

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Christ in Ecclesiastes

J. V. Fesko



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Where Wisdom is Found

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To

Robert Riley Fesko

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Acknowledgements

I was concluding a sermon series in the summer of 2007 at Geneva Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in Woodstock, Georgia. I asked the elders for suggestions for what to preach next. Elder Bud Winslow suggested that I preach through Ecclesiastes. He and his wife, Cindy, were reading the book for their devotions and found it very rich. He thought the book would also be helpful to the congregation.

I began reading commentaries on Ecclesiastes because the book was sometimes quite challenging to understand. I also contacted a colleague, Bryan Estelle, an Old Testament professor at Westminster Seminary California, and asked him for resources. In the autumn I traveled to San Diego for a theology conference. While stuck in traffic with Bryan and my current pastor, Zach Keele, we began to discuss Ecclesiastes.

What could have been a long and boring ride became a most fruitful conversation. Our discussion helped me gain better understanding of Ecclesiastes and proved more valuable than all the sessions I attended at the conference. I am much indebted to Bud, Bryan, and Zach for their sugges-

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I dedicate this book to our son, Robert Riley Fesko, whom my wife is carrying at this time. My prayer is that our son will never know a day apart from Christ. I also pray that Robert will draw near to Christ through Word, sacrament, and prayer, and in so doing will be conformed to Christ's image through the Spirit and renewal of his mind.

Robert, my son, I pray that our heavenly Father will give you the mind of Christ, filled with a cruciform wisdom.

Escondido, California
December 2009

Introduction

In my Christian walk of thirty-plus years, I have rarely heard Christ preached from the Old Testament. I have never heard a sermon preached from Ecclesiastes or from other wisdom literature such as Job or Proverbs. Perhaps one reason why wisdom literature in the Scriptures is ignored in preaching is that it is often challenging to understand.

People look at the Law, see its imperatives, and rest easy in their understanding of it, since it seems to offer little ambiguity. But when they go to Proverbs, they find the seemingly contradictory counsel of not answering or of answering a fool according to his folly. What is a person to do—answer or not answer? The Bible is quite aware of the ambiguity of life from a human perspective, or as Ecclesiastes says, “Life under the sun.” Many Christians do not want ambiguity. Yet how many Christians wander through the gray areas of life, wishing they could find clear counsel?

Another problem with understanding a book like Ecclesiastes is that many people read the statements of wisdom in Ecclesiastes as if they were ironclad promises. Yet many of the proverbs and statements in Ecclesiastes are observations, not

promises. Treating an observation like a promise can lead to bad theology. For example, “Raise up a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it” is a proverb, not a promise. Its meaning is double-edged: raise a child well, and he will likely be a good child. But the reverse is also true: raise a child poorly, and he will likely be a bad child.

How then can parents raise a child well? They should do the right things, such as training the child in the fear and admonition of the Lord and living as examples of godliness and piety. But in the end, a child will be righteous and godly only by God’s grace in Christ as applied by the Holy Spirit. There are no surefire parenting formulas for spiritual success. How many parents have seemingly done everything right and constantly interceded for a child in prayer only to watch him wander off in spiritual darkness? Such circumstances call for ultimate wisdom from the mind of Christ.

Another troubling practice I have seen is the moralistic use of wisdom literature. People have cited the book of Proverbs as if it were a book of moral principles, somewhat like what is offered in *Aesop’s Fables*. They make no effort to connect the Proverbs to Christ. They read passages from the wisdom portion of the Scriptures and say, “This says nothing about Christ.” Can we truly say that any portion of Scripture inspired by the Spirit of Christ has nothing to do with Christ? Are we

reading Scripture right when we walk away only with morals without the conviction of our need for Christ and the assuring message of His gospel? Legalism thrives on the Law but is often frustrated by wisdom; hence, many people treat wisdom as if it were law. Wisdom, rightly understood, offers another outlook on Christ. It is a necessary part of a healthy spiritual diet because it tells us that in the midst of life's ambiguities we must lean not on our understanding but upon Christ's.

What I hope to accomplish in this book is to address such shortcomings and to offer the church a window into the wonderful world of a Christ-centered understanding of the wisdom literature of the Bible, specifically the Book of Ecclesiastes. In the pages that follow, I will explain what wisdom literature is and how it finds ultimate fulfillment in Christ, who is the incarnate wisdom of God. In so doing my prayer is that more people will love the wisdom literature of the Scriptures as they read Ecclesiastes through the lens of the crucified and risen Messiah.



1

The Futility of Life

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Some books of the Bible are challenging. Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, presents difficult doctrines. If the apostle Peter could say, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that he found some things in Paul's letters difficult to understand, it is quite understandable that we struggle with certain books of Scripture. Ecclesiastes is also a book filled with difficult terrain. We find ourselves like astronauts on a seemingly barren surface as we grope for traction in its words. Some concepts appear to emerge so clearly that they inspire songs such as The Byrds' 1962 hit "Turn, Turn, Turn (to Everything There is a Season)." Other passages mystify and challenge us.

If we approach Ecclesiastes with a works-based righteousness theology, this book will make

absolutely no sense. A works-based righteousness offers the simple formula: obey, and you will be blessed; disobey, and you will be punished. This approach to life and salvation takes a wisdom saying, such as "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6), and uses it like a formula. If I do "A" (train up a child in the way he should go), then "B" (when he is old, he will not depart from it) will undoubtedly be the result. Yet we know from experience that life is not so simple. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a formula. What happens when a parent does everything right but a child goes astray?

The immediate answer from a works-based righteousness person might be, "They must be harboring secret sin of some sort." Yet that offers no room for understanding a man like Job, who was righteous but still suffered horrific losses. It also offers no explanation for Christ, who was the perfectly righteous man who suffered everything we have suffered and more.

A nineteenth-century commentator says Ecclesiastes is a germ of the gospel that flowers in the advent of Jesus. Ecclesiastes is inspired by the same God who has breathed out the rest of the Scriptures, he says. Consequently, we can only understand what this book says in light of the gospel of Christ. If this book is ultimately about wisdom, there is no mere formula for it.

The Book of Proverbs says of wisdom: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit" (Prov. 26:4–5). What should we do with that seeming contradictory advice? Do we answer or not answer a fool? The solution calls for wisdom. And the Bible tells us wisdom is not simply the applied knowledge of old men who stroke their beards and puff their pipes as they ponder life's mysteries. According to the Bible, wisdom is ultimately found in Christ Himself. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22–25:

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The only way to understand the wisdom literature in Scripture, of which Ecclesiastes is a part, is to see its termination in Christ, who is wisdom incarnate. As we proceed through various portions of Ecclesiastes, let us increasingly be aware of the weight and helplessness that the author describes, then flee to Christ to find deliverance and redemption.

Before going further, we should talk about the author of Ecclesiastes. Many people have attributed the writing to King Solomon; however, the book never explicitly claims Solomon as author. A number of names have been proposed, but in the end, Ecclesiastes is like the book of Hebrews—we do not know its author. In Ecclesiastes 1:1, the author simply identifies himself as the *Preacher* and a son of King David. Since we do not know who wrote this book, we also do not know when it was written. Some think it was written in the days of Solomon, or the tenth century B.C., while others believe it was written during the exile, or the sixth century B.C. One thing is certain: it was written within the context of Israel's covenantal dealings with the Lord and during the time of the monarchy.

Futility and Vanity

Ecclesiastes opens with a statement of seeming hopelessness: “Vanity of vanities,” saith the Preacher, “vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). The meaning of the Hebrew word for *vanity* could also be translated as *futility*. Either way, the statement seems filled with hopelessness. What would lead the Preacher to say something like this?

The Preacher gives a number of examples to make his point: “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:3). This observation seems obvious, yet its wisdom seems to have fallen upon deaf ears and blind

eyes throughout the centuries. Think, for example, of the Great Wall of China. In the height of its grandeur, the Great Wall stretched four thousand miles; during the Ming dynasty it was guarded by a million soldiers; two to three million people died building it; and it took several centuries to build. The Wall has been hailed as one of man's greatest achievements, for supposedly it is the only man-made object that can be seen from outer space. So in what way is this labor of man reduced to futility and vanity?

Much of the Great Wall has disintegrated over time. Literally miles of the wall vanish each year. And no, the Wall cannot be seen from outer space—that is an urban legend. So the words of the Preacher aptly describe the futility of such endeavors:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

No matter how much man toils and labors, he is never satisfied with what he has. This spirit drives the economy in our own country. People have an insatiable thirst for things such as new cars, new clothes, and new houses. They are never satisfied. We would think that man would examine what has happened over the years and learn that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Think of some of man's greatest achievements. What has happened to the great pyramids of Egypt? Sure, they still stand, but they are crumbling. The vast majority of them has either been destroyed or buried beneath an ocean of desert sand. The pyramids were built as great tombs in which Egyptian royalty could pack possessions for their journey into the next world, but today they are colossal monuments to the futility of life. The possessions entombed within the great pyramids have been stolen, are displayed in some museum, or are buried beneath the sand. As Ecclesiastes says, "All is vanity."

In 1918, the so-called "War to end all wars," which killed nineteen million soldiers, came to an end. World War Two, which followed, destroyed forty million soldiers and fifteen million civilians. Many wars have been waged by successive generations, each thinking *this* war would secure peace once and for all. How truly the words of the Preacher echo through the tumult:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after (Eccl. 1:9–11).

Plato, the great Greek philosopher, was right in saying: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” The Preacher likewise says, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2).

No Futility in Christ

Vanity; is this what everything in this life is reduced to? Is the purpose and end for which God created man mere vanity? The answer to these questions comes from the apostle Paul: “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21). Paul reflects upon *vanity*, the very subject matter of the opening of Ecclesiastes.

God subjected the creation to futility or vanity because of man’s sin. When man seeks significance apart from God, forsaking the true reason for his

existence, he discovers all his labors are meaningless. All his monuments melt into nothingness. Everything he works on is given to others. The only way to be set free from the bondage of decay is to receive the freedom of the glory of the children of God through Christ. The wisdom of Christ, who is God Himself and yet perfectly human, shows us what it means to be truly human. The author of Proverbs shows us how wisdom and obedience go hand in hand: "The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom; and before honour is humility" (Prov. 15:33). Christ has given us an example to follow, and He has redeemed us.

Those who do not know Christ are consumed by an insatiable desire and never-ending thirst, which result in futility and vanity. But those who look to Christ find satisfaction, rest, and satiation in Him, for He says: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). For those who see no end to their labors and toil, Christ promises rest: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Those who are joined to Christ know their labor is not in vain.

Those who are united to Christ do not have to earn their place in God's presence or achieve salvation by their labor, for Christ's labor and obedience is what secures their salvation. Those in Christ, therefore, do not work for salvation; they

rest, looking by faith to Christ. In this, we war not against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, and the like. And unlike the wars of man, this war has an end, not because we die, but because Christ gives us peace and life. As the author of Hebrews tells us: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). Likewise the apostle Paul tells us that Christ has conquered sin and the devil, and now sits at the right hand of the Father. In the end He will destroy death (1 Cor. 15:22–28). We find peace, rest, and conclusion in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Apart from Christ, we find only vanity and futility. Scripture tells us the number of man is 666, three times the number of the day upon which man was created. Wicked people will never know the end of their labors or the peace of entering the eternal Sabbath rest of the Lord. In Christ, the wisdom of God, we find completion, rest, meaning, and significance, for His number is 777, the number of completion.

The danger of living in this world is that, even as Christians, we can get caught up in the vanity and futility of man. We get caught up in the rise and fall of empires, revolutions, and counter-revolutions, forgetting our union with Christ and the significance that He gives to life itself. In the

movie *Bridge on the River Kwai*, Colonel Nicholson was taken prisoner by the Japanese and forced to build a bridge over which the enemy could move supplies. Colonel Nicholson tells one of his subordinates: "One day the war will be over. And I hope that the people that use this bridge in years to come will remember how it was built and who built it. Not a gang of slaves, but soldiers, British soldiers, even in captivity." Nicholson became so wrapped up in the bridge-building project that he forgot he was serving the enemy. He forgot he needed to work against the Japanese, not with them.

What is the purpose of all our labor? Do we work for the glory of man and get caught up in grand but ever-failing schemes, or are we centered upon Christ and His kingdom, which will truly last forever? The kingdom of God is found in the simplicity of teaching a child about Christ. The kingdom of God is something as ordinary as placing a tithe in the offering plate so that the gospel can go forth into the world to gather in the people of God, who are the living stones of His final temple. The kingdom of God is as simple as a prayer uttered in earnest faith in Christ: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Conclusion

Apart from Christ, we are crushed by the words "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of

vanities; all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). Only in Christ are we freed from the bondage of vanity and futility. Only in Christ may we know peace, rest, and the end of our labors. Christ has completed all of our labors, which we are to receive by faith alone in Him. Only with a mind guided by wisdom, or knowing the mind of Christ, will we know that life is not futility or vanity.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is creation subject to futility or vanity?
2. In whom is wisdom ultimately found? Why is that?
3. In whom is futility removed? Why?
4. In what ways can we become wrapped up in the futility of man?
5. Why isn't the work of the kingdom subject to the futility and vanity of man?