

## **The Search for Happiness 1: Our Predicament**

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Today, next Sunday and on August 21<sup>st</sup>, I will preach a 3-part series based on Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult to understand, partly because we tend to think that its apparent pessimism clashes with the optimism that we often assume ought to characterize life in Christ. Some have said that only those 70+ years should be reading Ecclesiastes. Is it because only the old can understand looking back with regret as Ecclesiastes seems to do?

We don't often hear pastors preach from Ecclesiastes. Even the Revised Common Lectionary has only one selection from this book: chapter 3:1-13, the reading scheduled for a New Year's service in all three cycles of the church calendar, Years A, B and C. In truth I've only ever heard this passage from Ecclesiastes 3 read at funerals.

The translation that I asked to be read today was published in 2019. The translator's intention was to remain as close as possible to the way the original language of Ecclesiastes was structured and understood at the time. For example, the translator avoided the use of the words "meaningless" or "vanity" in his translation, because both communicate negative connotations today. Rather, the translator uses the more neutral word "mirage" which then permits the reader to think for himself/herself more broadly and more deeply on how this word could actually be the master key in unlocking the whole meaning of Ecclesiastes.

There is continuing debate on when this book was written. For our purposes today and for the next two sermons on Ecclesiastes, I will take the side of those who say that this book was written in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, based on the vocabulary and style of the text that better reflects the Hebrew of that era. This was the era when Egypt ruled the region of Israel. If this dating is correct, it means that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, for Solomon was king in the 10<sup>th</sup>-century BC. In fact, the author never directly identified himself as Solomon. The author self-identifies as the Qoheleth, which is the Hebrew title of the book.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of our reading today contains the key words/phrases foundational to the whole book. These are: "mirage" which can be understood as transitory or fleeting; "profit" which can be understood as material advantage; and "under the sun" which can be understood as the social and political circumstances of the time. It is important to remember that in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BC, the people would have been under Egypt's rule. "Under the sun" would be a reference to life under Egypt's governance.

The next section, verses 4 to 11, contrasts the constancy of the cycles of nature versus the temporal or impermanent nature of humanity.

The third section, verse 12 of chapter 1 to verse 16 of chapter 2 is a thought experiment designed to reveal the nature of the human search for happiness. Verses 17 to 23 is the emotional reaction to the results of this mind experiment.

Verses 24 to 26 states what we learn from the experiment.

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### **Sermon: “The Search for Happiness: Our Predicament”**

Yunchan Lim, the 18-year-old from South Korea won this year’s Van Cliburn piano competition. Music critics and members of the jury have judged his rendition of Rachmaninoff’s 3<sup>rd</sup> piano concerto as possibly the best ever of all time. You may be familiar with the myth that surrounds this composition, that it is by far the most fiendishly difficult of piano concertos. What distinguished Yunchan Lim from the rest of the field was his ability to effortlessly bring out the concerto’s complex intertwined melodic themes from out of its massive forest of notes and beautifully make them speak the soul of Rachmaninoff in one long pianistic statement, a true work of art.

Listening to Yunchan Lim’s artistry, I transitioned to the literary art in Ecclesiastes, its prose and poetry. Indeed, there are several layers of complexities in Ecclesiastes, some readily discerned and others veiled begging to be revealed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In reading Ecclesiastes we let the Qoheleth’s literary and rhetorical tools stimulate our imaginative and creative minds to see the message behind the text. This book is a philosophical treatise, an essay on the fleeting nature of life and the enigma of both happiness and sadness in juxtaposition to the sovereignty and permanence of God. Ecclesiastes is indeed a masterful work of art that when read from this perspective, truly begins to speak to the soul.

The very first verse of chapter 1 is already an enigma. Who is the Qoheleth? By definition, the Qoheleth is someone who gathers people into an assembly. This is the reason our English Bibles translate Qoheleth to Ecclesiastes, the only book in the Bible with a translated title. Ecclesiastes is derived from its root “ekklesia” – literally an assembly called out from the masses. It has come down to us as “église” in French, or “iglesia” in Spanish. The grammarians among us might be interested to know that the title “Qoheleth” is a participle, a verb acting as a noun. Hebrew is a gendered language just like French, and Spanish. “Qoheleth” is a feminine participle – could Qoheleth be a woman hiding behind a masculine persona, the son of David, king in Jerusalem? If Qoheleth were a woman, would we read the text differently?

The second verse is the hypothesis of Ecclesiastes – that which Qoheleth desires to put to the test. It is even more enigmatic. ‘A mirage, nothing but a mirage,’ says Qoheleth, ‘a mirage, nothing but a mirage. It’s all a mirage.’ Why?

But why use the translation “mirage?” Or “meaningless?” Or “vanity?”

The technical definition of this Hebrew word is vapour, or breath. It communicates a sense of the temporary, the fleeting, the transitory. That word in the Old Testament has been assigned multiple meanings, all metaphorical. Thus, our standard translations translate that word variably: delusion, emptiness, fraud, futile, idols, useless, worthless. Famously in Ecclesiastes, its metaphorical meaning is taken to be meaninglessness or vanity. Yet, that very same word is the very same name of the second son of Adam and Eve: Abel. Surely Abel the man was not meaningless nor mere vanity. Surely, he stood for something noble? Perhaps it might indeed be better to lay aside value judgments inherent in our choice of words and begin to read Ecclesiastes and this master key of a word repeated 30+ times in the text initially as “fleeting” – and then make our conclusions after absorbing the whole work.

Qoheleth sets out in verse 3 his first experiment, his first research question so to speak, to test the hypothesis that everything is a mirage: “What profit is there for humans in all their hard work with which they work so hard under the sun?”

What follows in verses 4 to 11 is poetry and we must read it as such, not letting ourselves get derailed by the obvious statements on the cyclical nature of natural phenomena. Everyday the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The winds may seem to turn every which way but ultimately, they come back to where they began, for example, the trade winds. The water cycle continues unabated – the streams feed the sea and the sea feeds the streams.

Some have fallen into the trap of reading these verses as a declaration of cosmic futility and therefore aimless, meaningless. I disagree with this understanding. The reliably constant rhythms of nature are critical to life. If these rhythms were to fall apart, we will most likely all die. Take the theory of anthropological global warming for example, which if were true would be a disturbance of the rhythm of nature that could be catastrophic. Cosmic futility as an interpretation of verses 4 to 11 is a red herring of an interpretation. It gains traction only if we read Ecclesiastes from the perspective of “meaninglessness” as the meaning of the word Abel. It doesn’t make sense.

The key to understanding this section is in verses 4 and 8. These declare that human generations come and go but nature remains ever the same. Humans are transient, but the rhythms of creation remain the same. It is therefore a contrast between transience and permanence. Qoheleth is leading us to ask the question on what it means to confront and live with the reality of life’s impermanence, our point of reference being the permanence of the

rhythms of creation. Qoheleth is leading us to realize that we are always ever tempted to place a disproportionate value in what we think we can do despite our impermanence. Indeed, verse 8 declares the inability of humanity to fully understand how nature, how creation works. As a scientist by training, I fully agree. Verse 8 states: humans are unable to describe nature fully; humans do not see everything there is to see in nature; humans are unable to fully understand how nature works. This is eerily modern, isn't it? The obvious example today is that we are still arguing as to the origin of the strange quirky corona virus currently afflicting us the past couple of years.

Verses 9 to 11 points out that this blindness to our impermanence and deficient abilities lead to self-deception that we create new things. Qoheleth simply states that there is nothing new under the sun. Everything repeats. We tend to reinvent the wheel so to speak. We choose not to remember the past. As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana once wrote in 1905: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Eerily familiar today, is it not?

At this point, Qoheleth would have put us in our place, brought us down from our arrogance in order to ask the basic questions of life: where does happiness come from and how do we get there?

What follows is Qoheleth's thought experiment, a case study so to speak, to test the hypothesis that everything about us is fleeting, a mirage. Qoheleth asks 3 questions:

First: What is the human predicament?

Second: What to us is wisdom as opposed to foolishness?

Third: Is self-indulgence a path to happiness?

I gave this 3-part series the title: "The Search for Happiness." Qoheleth intended in his first experiment to reveal what makes a person happy. I gave the first of this series the subtitle: "Our Predicament." In chapter 1 verse 13, Qoheleth makes a very brief but highly charged statement defining humanity's predicament: "It is a dreadful task God gave humans to tackle!" Qoheleth targets the manner in which persons work extraordinarily hard to achieve that which they think will give them fulfillment "under the sun" (verse 14). We must understand that "under the sun" in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BC could have very well been the code word for life under Egypt's rule. The dreadful task could refer to what the Jews had to do, presumably breaking faith with their religious traditions, to attain by hard work what they hope would make them happy. This sounds so eerily modern, doesn't it? Nothing is ever new under the sun. Shall I state it? What do we break faith with, in the hope of obtaining what we believe will bring happiness?

Allow me to highlight a few points that contribute importantly to Qoheleth's conclusions.

Briefly stated, Qoheleth posits that it is difficult, it is a "dreadful task," to find the happiness which we constantly seek. Astoundingly, Qoheleth claims that this human problem is from God himself. As if to rub salt into the wound, Qoheleth sates in verse 14 that happiness is unattainable: "I considered every doing that is done under the sun – and look, everything is a mirage and a chasing after wind." One cannot straighten what is already bent, and one cannot find that which is missing, verse 15.

As for the second question, wisdom versus foolishness, or essentially the question of how to make wise choices, Qoheleth states that the more wisdom you have, the more frustrated you become, verse 18. This reminds of the strange statistic that Nobel prizes are awarded for work accomplished by the scientist in his or her youth. The young tend to push beyond the box; the wiser old folk tend to see all the barriers of the box. The daring of youth begins to fade away with the wisdom of old age. Qoheleth remarks that more knowledge brings more pain. You might agree that Qoheleth makes a valid point. Why then do we seek knowledge and wisdom as a path to happiness? Is ignorance truly bliss?

As for the 3<sup>rd</sup> question, Qoheleth assuming the wisdom and material wealth of the character of king Solomon concluded that self-indulgence brought to the highest degree is never enough to bring happiness. All it is was hard work and all hard work does is reveal to us that one cannot attain happiness through self-indulgence – it is a chasing after the wind.

Qoheleth then goes into his emotional response, and it is painful to read. He observes that both the wise and the foolish go to the same fate – the grave. So why favour wisdom over foolishness if the end result is the same? As for hard work, Qoheleth states that all material wealth gained passes on to the heir who did not work for it. That is a great evil, Qoheleth declares! Once more, we do see this today in varied forms. Is this perhaps the reason why some of the wealthiest bequeath their fortunes to their favourite pets? Oprah Winfrey herself will leave \$30 million to her three spaniels Sophie, Solomon, and Lauren if they outlive her. So eerily modern, this Qoheleth.

Everything in this thought experiment turns finally around to Qoheleth's verdict in verse 24 of chapter 2. Qoheleth expresses it in the negative sense, another enigma: A person who has the necessities of life and attributes this to his own hard work – nothing is good in him. Crassly stated, patting oneself on the back never really satisfies. Deeper than this, Qoheleth's pain expressed in verses 15 to 22 of chapter 2 arises from the human being's natural bent to want to be in control, to want credit for his success, to be recognized for what he does, to be remembered after he dies. Qoheleth declares that this is not the path to happiness.

What then is the way to happiness revealed to Qoheleth through first thought experiment?

Qoheleth observed that a person who has and by implication enjoys the necessities of life is in that state of happiness only by virtue of the providence of God. Verse 26 wraps it all up: the person who is not of God is condemned to believe that hard work and accumulation of material wealth brings happiness – he is mistaken and will be disappointed. The person who is of God – to him God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

No matter our circumstances “under the sun” – for Qoheleth under the rule of despotic Egypt, for us today, whichever government or culture we disagree with, laying aside our faith traditions for the fleeting mirage-like ways of current fads in hopes of gaining happiness, all that is a chasing after the wind. It is much better to be true to the One who was, is, and is to come. The Almighty who is the same yesterday, today and ever will be: our God revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is true happiness.

Amen.