

## 211 The Whole Duty of Man

At first glance the Book of Ecclesiastes comes over as one of the gloomiest books in the Bible! The human writer is “the Preacher, the Son of David”, who was king over Israel in Jerusalem (1.1 & 12), and traditionally understood to be King Solomon himself. Various Jews and Christians down the ages have questioned why the book is even within the “canon” of sacred Scripture, as its recurrent message of “All is vanity” – in other words, futile – is hardly encouraging!

But here is Ecclesiastes sitting in its God-given place within God’s Word. As such we can accept that its divine author is the Holy Spirit Himself, giving guidance and blessing to God’s people, be they Jew or Christian. Any gloom is there for a reason, and this gloom comes nowhere near to having “the last word”!

As king, this human author had “everything going for him” in this life (eg., 2.1-11). Yet when all is said and done, he finds everything to be “vanity” (the word occurs nearly forty times in the book). Throughout, he wrestles with issues such as righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly, justice and injustice, riches and poverty, life and death, finding along the way various “evils” to be found “under the sun” (over twenty occurrences of this phrase).

So the temptation as we read these words is to give up and go and put the kettle on – another act of vanity perhaps! But we mustn’t give up, for any gloom in this book is there for a precious purpose.

First, we can see that the “vanity” the Preacher identifies is very real for many people. How easy it is, and how common these days, for folk to strive to enjoy themselves while they

can, grabbing every ounce of passing pleasure in the belief that that is what life is all about, and only about. Without God, we can understand why this approach of “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (I Corinthians 15.32) can take over. The Preacher corrects this old mistake: he links our enjoyment of the good things of life to our remembering that these are all gifts from God (eg., 2.24-26 / 3.13 / 5.18-19).

Next, the Holy Spirit shows us there is much more being said in Ecclesiastes than we might notice at first. Besides emphasising the many gifts which God gives to us, the Preacher also urges us to be wildly generous – “Cast thy bread upon the waters ....” (11.1-2), bringing to mind the Lord’s own words later on – “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over ....” (Luke 6.38) – that picture of the sack of grain, crammed full to overflowing and beyond, that comes to the generous giver.

There is also a quiet theme running through the book concerning the value of the simple life, this coming from a man who had tried all the other types of living and had found them unsatisfying. Instead the Preacher speaks of the value of contentment, and of honest, straightforward hard work, despite the possibility of material poverty (eg., 2.24 / 3.13 / 4.6 / 5.10,12,18, / 7.1a / 9.9-10 / 11.4-6). We can think here of the words of the Lord Jesus and of Paul later on – (eg., Matthew 6.27-34 / Romans 12.16 / Philippians 4.11). And in the famous passage about time here (Chapter 3.1-8), we are reminded of rhythm, order, unhurriedness – qualities in life bringing much benefit, especially in hectic days.

Finally the Preacher comes to the heart of it all – our need to “fear God” (eg., 3.14 / 5.7 / 7.18 / 8.12). The climax of the book is grand! – “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole

matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (12.13). No gloom here! The Holy Spirit, through the voice of the Preacher, having explored everything that, without God, is simply a waste of time and effort, points us firmly back to the Source! (eg., Exodus 20.1-17 / Deuteronomy 6.4-5 / Matthew 22.34-40). This “fear of God” is about our steady consciousness of Him as our Creator, our joyful obedience to Him through His Son Jesus Christ, our precious Lord and Saviour, and our humble accountability before Him as our Judge,

We are reminded from the gloom in Ecclesiastes that any God-excluding human activity does indeed end up as mere “vanity”; and equally we are reminded from the HOPE in Ecclesiastes that, “The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God!” (I Kings 18.39): true, real and wonderful.

**© 2016 Faithful Sheep Ministries - [www.fsmins.org](http://www.fsmins.org)**