



Speaker:  
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## All is Vanity

Series: Ecclesiastes • 3 of 3

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Throughout this book, Solomon labours the point about the vanity of life. If an unbeliever, living as they do in the wilderness of this life, considers the world around them, they should conclude there is no meaning in life.

For the few people in this world who do reach that conclusion, life can become almost unbearable. While people are immersed in the lights and sounds of this world's distractions, they can enjoy a measure of happiness.

But those who are able to stand back and take stock of all they've done and all they're doing are left stunned. One unbelieving friend of mine who came to this realisation, that there really was no point to man's existence, concluded he may as well kill himself. He hasn't done it yet, and I doubt he ever will, but it shows us what can happen when people wake up from the dream Satan has put them in.

Solomon is not in quite the same position. Now I should admit to you that getting into Solomon's head isn't easy, and I'm not sure I've figured out exactly where he's coming from. Some Bible students, while maintaining they believe Ecclesiastes is part of holy writ, almost write off the book doctrinally. They say Solomon is in a state of utter confusion and we should therefore take little notice of what he says.

That's not how I view the book. I think it's full of doctrinal goodness, even if sometimes we glimpse despair in Solomon. Why Solomon's different from my friend and people like him is I think Solomon is a believer.

And I think in some respects he's like every one of us. I've certainly had some of the same thoughts as he has. I can preach that the only thing that counts is God and being in his service. But that doesn't mean it's easy for me to view many of the things I've done in life as pointless!

There are many views about Solomon as people have tried to understand him. My best guess is he believes in God but he's trying to view the things of this world apart from God. And he does us a great service. He increases the contrast between the things of this world and the things of God. So as we continue, and we see him wrestle with these big issues, we'll cut him some slack.

## 1. Pleasure

Our chapter begins with Solomon entering on a great experiment. His aim was to consider a whole raft of experiences and see if any had meaning. Here's a list of them:

- v3: **drinking**. He'd drunk wine before, but this time it was part of an experiment. Some say it was carefully controlled drinking— which is what I believe—while others say he got blind drunk.
- v4: **building**. He had the oversight of a number of building projects. His own house was very grand—bigger even than the temple he built.
- v4: **horticulture**. He planted vineyards and maintained them, allowing him to produce plenty of good quality wine.
- v5: **landscaping**. He created parks and gardens for the enjoyment of himself and his family (and hopefully the servants, too). And he planted all kinds of fruit trees.
- v6: **forestry**. He not only carried out standard management of the woodlands; he created a system of reservoirs and irrigation to keep the woodlands healthy.
- v7: **servants**. He had a great many servants, so many that any task he disliked in the slightest could be given to other people to do.
- v7: **farming**. He owned large numbers of farm animals, like cattle and sheep, providing as much meat and dairy products as he could ever wish.
- v8: **wealth**. He amassed to himself a lot of money and large amounts of precious metals. Although most people think spending money is the best bit, some people take as much delight in simply making money and enjoying the thought of being wealthier.
- v8: **choirs**. He employed male and female choristers, allowing him to organise grand musical and choral performances.
- v8: **women**. He married hundreds of women and had girlfriends on top of that.
  - 1 Kings 11:3—He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines.

Given all his possessions and his achievements, he honestly believed he became the greatest king ever. He still had the wisdom given to him by God. He'd been able to do almost anything he imagined, anything he thought would give him pleasure.

And he'd had a great time. Variety is the spice of life, so they say. And he'd been able to get involved with all kinds of interesting projects.

"Then" he says in v11, *I stood back and considered it all... And realised all was vanity*. All which excited him at the time—**vanity**. All the sensual pleasures he enjoyed—**vanity**. All his vast wealth—**vanity**.

## 2. Wisdom

Solomon has already spoken a bit about wisdom. I mentioned that there were different types. There's administrative ability. There's wisdom in understanding people. And there's

also a perverted type of wisdom sometimes found in the children of men who don't know God.

When it comes down to it, Solomon knows that wisdom is a good thing to have. v13: it's better to be wise than unwise. And that applies to unbelievers, too. They're better off if God gives them a measure of wisdom than if he leaves them in darkness.

But not even wisdom escapes Solomon's analysis. He looks at wisdom itself and concludes that not even being a wise person can bring meaning to your life. Why? Because the wise man, just like the foolish man, is going to die:

- v15: "what happens to the fool will happen to me also."
- v16: "how the wise dies just like the fool!"
- [v16]: "... Of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been forgotten."

Previously, I've pictured for you a man on his deathbed. He considers his wealth or his achievements, and suddenly realises how worthless it all is. I suggested to you many on their deathbeds will wonder, *What was it all for?*

I like to quote from other Bible writers to show Solomon's were not just random thoughts of a man in turmoil. Listen to what the psalmist says: [Psalm 49:10—For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish...](#)

Over the past few weeks, I've been trying to offer support to a friend of mine whose brother had a terminal illness. His brother died over the Christmas period. He was a wealthy businessman. A millionaire. He and his wife went on all the holidays and cruises they could ever wish for. He had a season ticket for Liverpool for one of those VIP boxes. They had nice cars. They built a massive house on a hill in Cheshire.

And it was when he realised he was on his deathbed that everything changed. He was now staring eternity in the face. How important do you think he reckoned all his wealth was now? He was a lifelong atheist and ridiculed every attempt my friend made to witness to him. But when it came down to it, when the vanity of life hit him right in the face, it was my friend he asked to see. Just hours before he left this existence, just one thing was important to him: he said to my friend, his brother, "Will you teach me how to pray?"

That's been the experience of many people throughout history. I'm sure it doesn't surprise you. But are we not a little surprised that Solomon, on his deathbed, will have wondered even what the point of having *wisdom* was? Death was coming anyway, and not even the righteous escape it.

### 3. Hard work.

In v18, Solomon again can hardly believe that, when he dies, all the results of his life's work will be given to someone else. And there's no guarantee the ones who inherit everything he has will be wise. They could turn out to be stupid and irresponsible.

Karen and I are members of an organisation some of you will have heard of called English Heritage. They own hundreds of properties all over England, from castles to mansions. And sometimes you read about the history of some important family who owns an estate. And each generation left it as an inheritance for their children. And this could work successfully for many generations.

But all it takes to ruin everything is one rogue. Someone who wastes his inheritance on dodgy investments, gambling or worse. Unable to afford the upkeep of the estate, the heir is forced to hand it over to some charitable trust or sell it to a foreigner.

No wonder Solomon thinks, *Why bother?* But it's not only the risk of some irresponsible child squandering their inheritance. Solomon thinks there's something unfair in a child inheriting great wealth that they haven't worked for in the slightest way. v21: "sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil."

If someone's children are genuinely in need, and you can help them by leaving them some money in your will, that can be a good thing. But it's a different matter altogether when people leave money to children who are already quite well off, some of them even owning their own houses and having good jobs. I'm thankful that many of the Lord's people exercise proper wisdom in this and often decide their children are okay, giving their money to Christian charities or missionaries or something instead.

But think on this. If someone decided the wise choice was to leave their money to a Christian organisation, can they be sure the nature of that organisation won't change after they've gone? It could become corrupt or apostate. So even if you think you've chosen the better option, there's no telling what will happen in the future.

Added to all his other considerations, Solomon realised that the very intelligence and skill he used in *achieving* all he did would also be lost forever. When Solomon died, all those qualities died with him.

### 4. Solomon's message to the lost

The preacher, Solomon, presents a powerful message to the people of this world. I wish they could all read this book. He looks away from God for a moment to see if there's any real value in all the things he's done and all the things he's tried.

Solomon is telling them, *Look what I've tried*. He'd tried drink, hobbies, environmental projects, music, philosophy, money and girls. *And all was vanity*.

Based on my own experience, I find we become consumed all too quickly with the pleasures in life. I've wasted far too much time on stupid things. But one advantage to this is I can see where Solomon is coming from. I can look back at so much of my life and realise it was vanity.

We're surrounded by people in our families and circles of friends who fill their lives with pointless things. And none of it can provide what is most needed:

- The things of this world are unable to bring **deep and lasting satisfaction**
- The things of this world cannot deal with **a guilty conscience**
- The things of this world can do nothing about **a person's sin**

The apostle Paul weighs in on this. In Ephesians 4:19, he talks about the people in this world who *"have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."*

Here, Solomon (v22) reminds people about the sorrow which fills our lives. And in v24, he suggests people at least try to find some enjoyment in the things they do before they die. They won't find meaning in those things, but God nevertheless allows such people to have some happiness.

Later on in this book, we find Solomon apparently advising young people to just go out and enjoy life. But straight after this, he hits them with a stark warning about the judgement they'll face, and their life of pleasure seeking will have to be accounted for.

It's a classic example of Solomon being *sarcastic*. He wasn't really hoping young people would go out and live a life apart from God. And it's for that reason I'm always on the lookout for sarcasm elsewhere in Solomon's writings. I have a suspicion that v24 in our reading today has at least a hint of sarcasm in it.

To the person who's determined to live independently of God Solomon says, "Fine. Go and enjoy your life without God. You have a few simple pleasures, and perhaps you can find some enjoyment in your work before you die."

If that's not clear enough to the people of this world, we'll introduce something Jesus said. *Luke 12:19–21—And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.*

## 5. Solomon's message to the redeemed.

If you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, I thank God for it. I thank God for his great grace towards you. God targeted you and, by his Spirit, made you willing to seek him and attach yourself to him.

V26 describes you, then. You please God! How does that make you feel? Does it not make you feel all warm thinking about how much better you are than the sinners of this world? Does it not make your soul feel elevated, knowing just how good you are?

If it does, I have a lot of work to do! I have to convince you you're deluded! Because you and I sin. We don't just sin now and again; we sin every day. And we don't just sin every day; we sin throughout each day.

I hope you're with me so far. If you think I've exaggerated your sin—that is, if you don't believe you sin as much as I've suggested—you're in trouble. My first thought would be that you're not a Christian at all. You're faking it.

But let's assume you accept that you sin throughout the day, every day. Let's assume you know how serious it is to God. You know it displeases him. You know it's a sign you're taking your salvation for granted.

Now, I need to press this point home. God does not enable you to live righteously so that he can then be so impressed by your goodness that he accepts you. That's pure Roman Catholicism.

I need to emphasise that, if you're accepted by God right now, it's because you have been given the very righteousness of Christ himself. It means God is able to, if you like, look on you and see the wondrous perfections of his own holy Son. He can see your sin all right, **but he views it as forgiven in Christ.**

Getting back to v26, this is how you and I are able to please God. In redeeming us, he makes new creatures out of us. When he looks down on us and sees the goodness of Christ *in* us, it blesses him!

Solomon lists some of the things God gives to us, his people. He gives to different degrees, but we all receive them. And they can be viewed with reference to Jesus Christ:

- We receive **heavenly wisdom**. We fear God and we submit ourselves to him. This wisdom enables us to understand the gospel, an idea which can evade many of the greatest intelligences in this world. And if we have Christ, we have the one who is elsewhere described as wisdom *personified*.
- We receive **heavenly knowledge**. Through God's word, we gain in knowledge—not just the facts in the Bible, but the truth behind them as well. And in this way we're expected to grow in the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

- And we also receive **heavenly joy**. Solomon's right when he describes life as being full of sorrows. But the strange joy God gives to his children enables them to be happy in spite of all these things. We mustn't think joy is something that's always easily seen in the person. Sometimes it's subtle. But if you get to know a person, you'll eventually be able to know whether they have the joy of the Spirit of Christ or not.

Those who accept their vileness and present themselves to God in a state of humble submission become pleasing to God and receive things like wisdom, knowledge and joy.

If you read on in v26, you might find it's a little strange. Solomon describes a world where sinners do all the work but the children of God reap all the benefits. I don't know about you, but I can't relate to any of that!

Let's look at it from Solomon's perspective rather than our own. He's aware of those great stories about the Exodus and the taking of Canaan. And I'm sure he was impressed. The Hebrews left one country and were given valuables in abundance by the people. And when they cleared out Canaan, the spoils of war then came into their hands. Solomon would've seen this as a pretty normal way for God to work.

Let's not forget Solomon himself experienced life in this way. It says here in **1 Kings 4:21—Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.**

In his experience at least, the heathen *did* bring the fruits of their labour and give it to God's man!

But I'm sure he didn't think that was the normal experience for God's people. It's possible he was thinking more from a gospel perspective. What do I mean?

In the parable of the talents, Jesus pronounces a shocking judgement. From the man who was idle, he takes all his money and gives to another man who already has plenty. Now Jesus makes it clear there's a spiritual message there. It's about the end-time judgement and the world which comes after it.

At the judgement, the people of Norris Green, the people of Liverpool, the people of the UK and the people from the rest of the world will all stand before God. The majority will have spent their lives on that broad road of sinfulness which was only ever going to take them to their own destruction.

In this life, they didn't want the most important thing—Jesus Christ—but they had something at least:

- They'd been given experiences
- They'd had food and clothes

- Many will have enjoyed family relationships
- Some will have had plenty of money too.

Yet that pittance will be taken from them. They'll be stripped of every material thing they owned. They'll be separated forever from all the people whose company they enjoyed. Even the very feeling of being alive will be taken from them, facing instead a future which is conscious but can hardly be called "living."

Then there's the other group. By the grace of God, they found themselves placed on a narrow way. A way which involved being ridiculed in this world. A way which led to them being discriminated against. But it was a path which was always going to lead to eternal life.

These spent their lives living in spiritual abundance. Regardless of whether they had lots of possessions or not, and regardless of whether they had friends and family or not, **they had Jesus Christ. They had the most important thing.** Anything above that would be just trimmings.

And in the parable, Jesus teaches his hearers that these sheep of his, even though they already have God's riches in Christ, would be given more! In the parable at least, it's a picture of the world being stripped of its wealth and that wealth being given to the believers.

Ultimately, all which exists belongs to God: **Psalm 24:1—“the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”** It's all his, and at the judgement we're going to see a redistribution of things like nothing in history.

Quoting Jesus again, in Matthew 5:5 he says, **“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”** “The meek” is another term for God's people. I fully expect God to renovate this world into a paradise, and all of us who belong to him will have full and free access to it forever.

*All is vanity*, says the preacher. We can't find purpose in our existence through pleasure seeking, living wisely or working hard to get money.

What is the meaning of life? What is man's purpose? I couldn't put it better than what we read in our old catechism. Man's greatest purpose is to “glorify God and enjoy him for ever.”

*All is vanity.* But here's something which isn't vanity: **1 Corinthians 15:58—Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.**

Amen.