

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ECCLESIASTES

The word *ecclesiastes* means preacher. The book bearing the name is a sort of sermon, and the speaker is the son of David, king of Jerusalem, 1:1, 12. If this statement of the book is accepted as true, the question of its authorship is settled. There was but one son of David, humanly speaking, who is capable of writing such a treatise as this, Solomon.

The key-phrase is “*Under the sun;*” the key verse, 1, 2.

1. *Style of Ecclesiastes.*

The tone of a portion of it is sorrowful and apparently skeptical. Unbelievers and scoffers often appeal to it as a sanction for their doubts and a ground of attack against the general faith of the Bible. Voltaire and Frederick the Great are said to have been fond of certain parts, especially of those in which Solomon records his apparent infidelity.

The book reads like the experiences of one who had tried the world to the utmost, who had sounded its lowest depths, and found it false and hollow to the core, its pleasures delusions, its riches transient, its honors empty, its enjoyments and happiness, Sodom apples that turn to ashes on the lips. Hence it's sad and disappointed tone.

In all the Bible there is not a sadder. The nearest approach to it in this regard is the Eighty-eighth Psalm. A profound melancholy runs through it—melancholy which arises from a wide survey of human life and the doings of men, lit up here and there with a faint gleam of a brighter hope. The prevailing cry is that of weariness and despair: “**Vanity of vanities; vanity of vanities; all is vanity.**” This feeling of the preacher deepens into one of perplexity and apparent unbelief, 3:19; 9:2, 11; etc.

It is just such a cry as we often hear from the inquiring and skeptical spirits of our own age. It is not the voice of abstract right, or truth, or religion, but the bitter and agonizing utterance of one who has known much, felt much, tried much, been admired much, and yet who has seen through all the enormous pretensions and shams of the world.

Is the book skeptical? What is its purpose? How shall we interpret it? In some respects it is difficult to understand; it is very easy to misunderstand it.

2. Its character is earthly.

It looks at things as connected with the earth; it looks no higher. The key to it is found in the expression, “**under the sun**”—an expression found twenty-eight times in the book, and nowhere else in the whole Bible. “**Under the heaven**” is thrice mentioned, and “**upon the earth**,” some seven times. Nearly forty times does the Spirit of God in this book name the earth and things belonging to earth, as if His gaze were fastened on this world alone and were raised no higher. Obviously, the book has to do with this world exclusively. It never gets above the sun until the very last verses are reached.

If life be viewed as altogether apart from God, if it be contemplated exclusively in its relation to the earth, it becomes inexplicable and divine Providence an insoluble problem. Leave God out of the affairs of the world, and the conclusions of Solomon must needs follow that there is no profit under the sun in one’s labor; there is nothing new; wicked men are in the place of judgment; there is the oppression of the right, the wrong triumphant; folly and wisdom go the same road and to the same end; chance seems to regulate all things. In short, the beginning, middle and end of life becomes vanity and vexation of spirit. Exclude God from the world, and skepticism and materialism must be the inevitable result.

Such is the chief design of the book—to try and test things in order to prove how inadequate they are to satisfy the deepest and truest longings of the human heart.

In the book Solomon is experimenting upon the problem—Can the world, apart from God, meet man’s need? The verdict is here recorded—“**all is vanity.**” We will apply this principle to the book.

3. The preacher proves vanity “under the sun” from his own experiences, chaps, 1, 2.

He sets out with the thought of the world’s monotony.

- Generations come and go.
- The sun rises and sets.
- The winds fly their rounds.
- The rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full.

Some of his observations of natural phenomena are far in advance of anything known in his day by the students of nature. What he says about air currents in 1:6, is a matter of discovery only within the present age; and still more is this remark true of the statement of vs. 7. The Mediterranean, for instance, drains in part three continents. Into that sea the Nile, the Orontes, the Po, the Rhone, constantly flow; the Atlantic rushes into it through one mouth, the Black Sea pours into it through another.

What becomes of the surplus water that is continuously poured into the Mediterranean? This was the question which puzzled geographers for centuries. At length, a London chemist discovered the secret—that the clouds receive the surplus: evaporation accounts for all. How close is Solomon to this solution: “**All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return.**”

The preacher pertinently asks, “**Is there anything whereof it may be said, see, this is new?**” And he answers that it has been before. All is a weary go-round, nothing but a shifting of the old materials, a tiresome repetition, till life itself stiffens into dreadful monotony. “**Nothing new under the sun**”—“**vanity.**”

(1). The preacher made proof, next, of *pleasure* as promising satisfaction for the soul, 2:1-3. Mirth, amusements, wine, were tried. He gave banquets, balls, had shows and displays of every kind, and no doubt gained for himself the title of the “Merry Monarch.” But it was sheer failure—vanity he wrote upon this effort.

(2). He then tried *riches*, and the peculiar treasure of kings, as likewise the gratification of his aesthetic tastes, 2:4-11. He builded and planted, adorned and beautified. At his command palaces arose, fountains played, servants attended and musicians regaled his leisure hours. He affected art, increased his wealth and rejoiced in the success of his splendid projects. But once more complete disappointment was the issue—“**all was vanity and vexation of spirit** (a striving after wind).”

(3). His *weariness and disgust* ensued, 2:12-26. Confused, perplexed at the strange inexplicable fact that the wise man and the fool apparently fare alike under the sun, that they travel the same road, he “hated” life, took no pleasure in it, saw no advantage in it. With the pessimistic spirits of our restless age, Solomon is perilously near answering the question, Is life worth living?—in the negative. And no wonder. A soul made for God, striving to feed itself on husks, and seeking to gratify its infinite longings on things under the sun, can do no otherwise than become at length weary and disgusted with it all, and wish itself well out of the world.

4. *The preacher proves vanity under the sun from his wide observation*, 3-8:15.

(1). He observes, first of all, the regularity and unchangeableness of natural law, 3. Immutable continuity, inexorable law; men and beasts are alike in the presence of these mighty forces; one event befalls both; “**as the one dieth, so dieth the other.**”

(2). He next notes the wrongs and injustices practiced in the world, 4. Oppression, tyranny, envy, strife, division, they are to be seen everywhere, and the roots of them, too, insatiable greed. Observations on religion, on riches, and the uselessness of money as a means to satisfy the soul, follow 5, 6.

(3). He next looks upon the inequality of rewards and punishments of the righteous and wicked under the sun, 7, 8, 15, the problem which has puzzled God’s people through all time (Note 7:15; 8:14, which open this part of the book).

5. *The preacher's perplexity and apparent skepticism, 8:16-11.*

Let the reader ponder over chaps, 8:14, 15; 9:2-6; 10:5-11; 11:8-10; and he will discover that the wisest of men, Solomon, was totally unable to unravel the mysteries by which he was surrounded under the sun. He even goes the length of seeming to affirm that death ends all, that there is little, if any, difference in the treatment of the righteous and the wicked here.

With all their boasted progress the men of our times who live only under the sun have gotten no further. Life and its vicissitudes, viewed only as to this world and sphere (under the sun) become for the strongest intellect a tangled web whose meshes no mortal hand can disengage. Is it really surprising that the philosophers who speculate as to things under the sun, should at length in a sort of desperation declare the problem insoluble and name themselves very fittingly, agnostics—know-nothings? The experiment of Solomon, alas, is being made by multitudes even in our day, and with the like result— **“vanity and vexation of spirit.”**

6. *The solution, 12:13, 14.*

Here Solomon gets above the sun and things begin at once to disentangle and straighten. The **“fear of God”** is the Old Testament description of the New Testament “love of God.” Love God, obey Him, trust Him and all will be well with you, for the judgment approaches in which all wrongs will be righted and all mysteries cleared up, and you will be made glad with a joy unspeakable.

This is the key of the book.

- Live under the sun, rise no higher and doubt and unbelief will ensue.
- Live above the sun, spend the days with God, and light and peace you shall have.

Dr. McCook imagines a conversation between a bird and a mole which has pushed its head out of the ground: “What are you making such a noise about?” he asked the bird as it was swinging and singing on a branch of the tree.

“O, the sunshine, the trees, the grasses, the shining stream yonder, and the white clouds on the mountainside. The world is full of beauty.”

“Nonsense!” said Mr. Mole. “I have lived longer in the world than you have, and I have gone deeper into it; I have traversed it and tunneled it, and I know what I am talking about, and I tell you there is nothing in it but fishing worms.”

Let a man live **“under the sun,”** let him burrow in the earth and strive to get satisfaction for his soul out of it and he will have the experience of the mole. There will come the time, the bitter hour, when he will say with splash of tears and sobs of secret longing, “My soul hath no pleasure in it,” “I hate my life.” But let him rise above the sun and bask in the splendor of God’s light and presence and he will sing.

Ecclesiastes may be regarded as a sermon: Text, 1, 2, 3.

Part First.—Text proved:

1. By the preacher's experience, chaps, 1, 2.
2. By his observation, chaps, 3, 4.

Part Second.—Text unfolded:

1. The miseries of life.
2. The hypocrisies of life.
3. The wrongs and injustices of life
4. The riches and poverty of life.
5. The uncertainties of life.
6. The best way to get on through this dangerous life.
7. Live above the sun and all will be well.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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