

JOY  
at the End  
of the Tether

the inscrutable wisdom of ECCLESIASTES

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This book is dedicated,  
with a great deal of warm affection,  
to every fool in Christendom.

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# De Profundis

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.

PSALM 130:1

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Our word *profound* comes from the Latin *profundus*, which means deep. Most cheerfulness in the world is quite the opposite of this—superficial and shallow. Thump it hard and it will be sure to make a hollow sound. Of course we must also note that much deep thinking is melancholy. From these data we might conclude that deep is doleful and everything cheerful is a superficial waste of time.

The great Hebrew philosopher who wrote this book called Ecclesiastes calls us to joy, but to a joy which *thinks*, a joy which does not shrink back from the hard questions. He calls us to meditation, but to a meditation which does not despair. And as he points out repeatedly, shutting off every avenue of escape, only believers can enjoy the vanity which surrounds us on every side.

These are the very words of God.

<sup>1</sup>The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. <sup>3</sup>What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Eccl. 1:1–3)

Our author never calls himself Solomon by name, but rather *Qoheleth*. This means *gatherer, assembler, or preacher*. Nevertheless, Qoheleth identifies himself here as a son of David, and as a king in Jerusalem. Without entering into a detailed description of the debate between scholars, there is no conclusive reason not to attribute the book to Solomon.

This Solomon was given great wisdom by the Lord, but nevertheless, during the course of his life, he also fell into great enormities. During the time of his apostasy, he introduced the idolatry of some of his foreign wives into the public life of Israel. The book of Ecclesiastes was written in his old age, a repentant rejection of his previous apostasy. Still, that apostasy was grievous and its effects on the generations immediately after Solomon were more lasting than the impact of his repentance.

But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his



God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the LORD commanded. (1 Kgs. 11:1–10)

We see the outside of this sin described in the histories of Scripture. We also see the horrible consequences which afflict Israel in the centuries which follow Solomon. We see this sin from the inside, and the repentance following, in the pages of Ecclesiastes. What did the fall of Solomon—and the fall of Israel—*mean*? The surprising answer is that it meant nothing—vanity. Like all sin and unbelief, it came to . . . nothing.

The book demands careful consideration. Unlike the textual liberal, we should assume a single voice throughout the text of this book. Unlike the pietist, we should reject the temptation to accept the “edifying” passages and skim over the apparently difficult ones. And unlike the heretic, we should reject an elevation of the difficult texts at the expense of the pervasive orthodoxy of the book.

Ecclesiastes has four basic sections, or divisions. In the first, Ecclesiastes 1:2–2:26, we see that Solomon’s experience

shows that satisfaction cannot come from anything within the power or competence of man. In chapters 3:1–5:20, he shows that God is sovereign over *everything*. He then goes on to answer objections to this (perennially offensive) doctrine. Third, Ecclesiastes 6:1–8:15 carefully applies this doctrine that the sovereign God alone gives the power to enjoy this parade of vanity. Without an understanding of the Almighty, and without seeing His attributes, nature, and character, the world is nothing but an ongoing vexation of spirit. And finally, Ecclesiastes 8:16–12:14 removes various obstacles and discouragements, and addresses numerous practical concerns.

Throughout the book, two great refrains can be heard. When we come to understand the meaning of these refrains, we will then know that the meaning of life cannot be found by fumbling in the dark. Instead of viewing the book as a series of disjointed and sometimes contradictory statements, we must first listen for those themes which integrate all the teaching of the entire book. These themes are pervasive throughout all four sections.

The first refrain is summed up in the phrase *under the sun*—the phrase occurs numerous times and is extremely significant. “Under the sun” is the realm where vanity reigns and should be understood as *this* world, considered in its own right. A wise man will always consider and reflect upon what occurs “under the sun.” Work has no profit there (1:3; 2:11; 2:22); nothing is really new (1:9); everything is vain (1:14; 4:7); work is distressing (2:17); labor is hateful because someone else gets the fruit of it (2:18); a fool might receive the benefit of a man’s work (2:19,20); church and state are together corrupt (3:16); men are oppressed, of course (4:1); the unborn are at a distinct advantage (4:3); popularity is in constant flux (4:15); riches destroy their owners (5:13); the

wealthy are unable to enjoy their wealth (6:1); future generations are unknowable (6:12); men rule others and destroy themselves (8:9); work is incomprehensible (8:17); both good and evil men die (9:3); our emotions perish with us (9:6); time and chance happen to us all (9:11); ungrateful men despise the benefits of wisdom (9:13); and rulers establish the blind folly of egalitarianism (10:5).

All this—and a good deal more fooling about—occurs under the sun. These persistent reminders throughout the book are what make Ecclesiastes such a bane to cheerful fools.

But another theme, another refrain, is equally marked, and this one is missed by the cynic. This is the refrain which sings *the great gift of God*. Under the sun, vanity is God's scepter (5:18; 8:15; 9:9). For those who fear Him, He gives the gift of being able to actually enjoy this great big marching band of futility—the tubas of vanity bringing up the rear. God gives to a wise man the gift of watching, with a pious and grateful chuckle, one damn thing after another. All things considered, the furious activity of this world is about as meaningful as the half-time frenzy at the Super Bowl. But a wise man can be there and enjoy himself. *This* is the gift of God. The wise will notice how this point is hammered home, throughout the book, again and again. Slowly it dawns on a man that this is really a book of profound . . . *optimism*. “I know that nothing is better” (3:12–13); “So I perceived that nothing is better” (3:22); “Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting” (5:18–19); “So I commended enjoyment” (8:15); “Go, eat your bread with joy” (9:7–9).

All these things are done by those who fear God under the sun, just as the miserable will constantly sweat and labor under the sun. But the distinction, *as always*, is to be found in the sovereignty and grace of God. This is why the doctrinal

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foundation for joy—joy that lives at the end of the tether—must first be understood. When he understands, and not until then, a man may eat his bread, drink his wine, and rejoice. He may work hard, digging a hole that another will someday fill up. If he is a wise man, he will know that this work is vain and he will rejoice in it anyway. This is the gift of God. How is it possible? The subject is worth considering.

# The Meaning of Joy

Judge not according to the appearance,  
but judge righteous judgment.

JOHN 7:24

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We must guard ourselves. Sincere and thoughtful Christians need to resist two errors of interpretation as they seek to understand this small book of wisdom. The first is that of treating the word *vanity* as modern existentialists would treat it, meaning absolute meaninglessness. Of course, from beginning to end, including Ecclesiastes in the middle, the Bible rejects this error. And further, if Solomon were arguing the absolute meaninglessness of absolutely everything, then why should we trust his argument? It too is under the sun. How could anything, or any word, *mean* utter meaninglessness? Whenever anyone announces that there is no such thing as truth, a listener should always wonder if the speaker believes his expression to be *true*. Solomon is a wiser man than to fall into the idiocy of modern existential relativism. So vanity in this book does not mean final and ultimate

absurdity; something else is in view, which we will consider in its place.<sup>†</sup>

But the other error, common among the devout, is to rush headlong to pious and edifying conclusions before letting the force of Solomon's observations and argument work into our souls. We must not hasten to heal this particular wound lightly. The meaninglessness of all things, as Solomon presents it, must work down into our bones. We should let the Word do its work before we hasten to make Ecclesiastes a grab bag of inspirational quotes. If we are not careful, we will fall into the trap of writing pious drivel, saying that Solomon meant to say down is up instead of down is down. It can be a painful experience to read the work of devout commentators working manfully away as they try to sandpaper the rough spots in Ecclesiastes—it has to be *smooth* to be edifying.

If we want to avoid these pitfalls, we must begin by looking ahead a few pages. The first division of the book (Eccl. 1:2–2:26) can be divided into three sections. We will be considering the first of these subsections shortly (1:4–11). But before addressing these verses, we should look ahead at the conclusion of the first division to see where Solomon's argument is taking us. I have italicized a modification of the AV translation here.<sup>‡</sup>

*There is not a good [inherent] in man that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, apart from Him? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. (Eccl. 2:24–26)*

Obviously, we need to begin with the translation issues. In many translations, this section begins with “Nothing is better . . .” Scholars have inserted the word *better* here, even though the Hebrew text does not have it. This is done because that phrase *does* occur several other times in this book and it has simply been assumed that it was dropped out here. As it stands, however, it should be translated, “There is not a good [inherent] in man that he . . .”

Also, verse 25 should not read, “more than I,” referring to Solomon, but rather, “apart from Him,” referring to God. This is the reading followed by eight Hebrew manuscripts, the Septuagint, the Syriac, the Coptic, and the translation of Jerome into Latin. This is also the reading which fits best within the context of the argument.

So the message here is twofold. God is the One who gives things, and God is the one who gives the power to enjoy things. These are distinct gifts . . . just as a can of peaches and a can-opener are distinct gifts. Only the first is given to the unbeliever. The believer is given both, which is simply another way of saying that he is given the capacity for enjoyment. If we remember that this is the conclusion of this section of Solomon’s argument, it can help us understand what he intends as he lays out his premises.

**Blessed are they that keep His testimonies.**

<sup>4</sup>One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. <sup>5</sup>The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. <sup>11</sup>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. 1:4–11)

As we have considered, vanity does not refer to an absolute meaninglessness. We see now that it refers to an *inscrutable repetitiveness*. You washed the dishes last night, and there they are again. You changed the oil in your car three months ago, and now you are doing it *again*. All is vanity. This shirt was clean yesterday.

Solomon sees that generations come and go—one group of people replaces another (v. 4), and they are not really aware of one another (v. 11). Underneath them the stubborn earth stays put (v. 4). When the history of some group of people who lived previously intrudes upon us, we may be briefly amused or intrigued. But we do not really come to the point where we *learn*. Further, we should have every expectation that those who follow us will act in just the same way toward us. We will slip out of their memories, just as countless generations have slipped out of ours. This happens again and again, over and over. As the fellow said, the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

The sun rises, sets, and hustles back to rise again. Like the hypocrite at his prayers, the sun engages in vain repetition. The sun that rose this morning is the same one that



Abraham, Odysseus, David, Paul, Voltaire, Isaac Watts, and Robert E. Lee saw. And when the sun goes down, we have every expectation of seeing it again. It does not necessarily expect to see *us* again.

The jet stream runs in circles too—the natural world, it appears, runs in circles. So do we. What goes up comes down. What goes down comes up again. This is the meaning of vanity. Spinning wheels got to go round, as a fellow on the radio put it. A man may look in vain for something new in the weather. Water evaporates, rains, evaporates, and rains again, and the ocean never fills up. This whole world is a gigantic chalkboard illustration for us. Look at it as Solomon did, and learn a wearisome lesson.

We may try to break free of this repetition by saying that it does not exist. We may *ignore* the past and say, “See, *this* is new” (vv. 9–11). The latest “whatever” is whooped as the savior which will lead us out of our temporary postmodern malaise, our deep blue funk. Perhaps the Internet, or computers, or skyscrapers, or environmental activism, or snowboarding, or something will save us. But this does not help. Even the snowboarder, when he gets to the bottom, has to get back up to the top again.

And further, even this error is a repetition. The man who says he has found something new is *being* something old. As sure as the sun rises, men will continue to make the same mistake except for those to whom God gives *wisdom*. Every morning folly comes up over the horizon. Again. Morning, sunshine. Time to put the coffee on. Again.

To be wise, a man must know his limitations. “All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it” (v. 8). A wise believer is a man who knows the length of his tether. Only through the wisdom which God gives can he come to *enjoy*

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this limitation, this restriction, this vanity. And while a wise man may come to enjoy this vanity, even he cannot really express it.