

Under the Sun  
Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

What can we possibly learn from such a bleak and discouraging passage? We find none of God's great promises of salvation, none of His great assurances of providence here. And there aren't any prophetic words of warning, any calls to repentance either. So, how could such a passage possibly belong in a worship service, either Jewish or Christian?

Well, we could give the obvious answer: because it's in the Bible, because it's part of God's Word. And as Paul reminds Timothy, all Scripture is breathed out by God, and therefore all Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. All Scripture, not just our favorite verses or the parts that we find easy to understand, is given to us so that we might be adequate, equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Okay, but what can such a frankly depressing passage possibly have to teach us? How can it edify us in any way to read that everything under the sun is vanity, is futile, is as substantial as a breath or a puff of wind? I mean, that's not exactly inspiring, is it?

No, it's not. But let's remember who wrote these words: the son of David, who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem. There's only one man who fits that description: Solomon. And we know from I Kings that God gave Solomon "a wise and discerning heart" (I Kings 3:12), "wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore" (I Kings 4:29). In fact, Solomon's wisdom was said to be greater than "all the wisdom of Egypt" (I Kings 4:30), so great that "his fame was known in all the surrounding nations" (I Kings 4:31). So, if the wisest man in the world, the wisest man who ever lived said all these things, we should surely take them seriously.

But however much authority this passage has, it still doesn't seem to make sense. After all, we Christians know good and well that Jesus came to give us not just eternal life with Him forever, but abundant, meaningful life right here and right now (John 10:10). In fact, Jesus gave all His followers the grandest reason for living: to "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe" everything He has commanded us (Matthew 28:19). And Jesus promised to empower us to carry out this Great Commission. He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." With such work to do on behalf of such a Savior, how could life possibly be as dreary and empty as Solomon describes?

So, could the wisest man in the world have possibly been wrong? Well, no, not if we dig deeper into what he is saying. Take another look at verse 3, where Solomon refers to the labors that we accomplish "under the sun." Look at verse 13, where Solomon talks about the things that are done "under heaven." In verse 14, he insists that it is the works that are done "under the sun" that are vanity, as futile as trying to catch the wind. In other words, it's only the things that are "under the sun" that are meaningless.

Okay, but how does that help us? After all, everything in this world is under the sun. The earth itself, the winds, the rivers, the sea are all under the sun, along with all of us, and all our experiences and all our history. But if everything in the world is as meaningless as Solomon says, how can the rest of the Bible possibly be right?

Well, let's take a step back and think again. Is there anything that is not under the sun? Is there anywhere that is not under heaven? What about Heaven itself? And who lives in Heaven? God does. God's not under the sun, because as our responsive reading reminds us, He created the sun by the word of His power. Jesus is not under heaven, because all authority in heaven and on earth is His.

And so perhaps we can now see what Solomon is trying to say: a life that is only concerned with the things “under the sun,” is a life lived without any reference to God. A life lived “under heaven,” is a life that has no consciousness of Christ. It’s that kind of life that is vain, futile, pointless, empty. It’s that kind of perspective that leads us inevitably to despair.

And that does make sense, doesn’t it? For if we were to lower our eyes to behold only the things under the sun, if we were to lose sight of the glories of Heaven, if we were to believe that this world is all that matters because this world is all that is real, then verses 1-11 would indeed be an accurate description of our feelings and our understanding. In short, verses 1-11 explain how unbelievers see the world, at least if they are truly honest with themselves.

Okay, but why do we Christians need such a glimpse into a godless world? Well, remember what we’ve been studying over the last few weeks, the urgent need to spread the gospel so that more people will come to know Christ or to follow Him more consistently. If we don’t understand the way unbelievers look at life, how will we ever be able to communicate with them effectively? If we don’t take the time to understand how a life lived without God always leads to vanity, futility, and brokenness, how can we possibly point such worldly people to the only One Who can overcome their despair and give them victory?

Now, Solomon certainly needed to understand the way that unbelievers perceive the natural world, because lots of people in his time went so far as to worship it. Oh, they personified different parts of it into gods: The Canaanites, for example, worshipped Baal because they thought he controlled the storms. The Egyptians worshipped the Nile River because of its annual life-giving floods. And many, many ancient peoples worshipped the sun. In fact, the Pharaohs of Egypt even claimed to be the descendants of the sun god – that’s why their tombs are shaped the way they are, as the pyramids imitate the sun’s rays.

But no matter how many offerings any of those ancient people made, no matter how many temples they built, they had no real way to control or even to influence the forces of nature that they worshipped. As Solomon says, the winds just keep swirling along, and the rivers keep flowing into the seas, and the seas are never full. And there’s still nothing “under the sun” that can alter the course of a hurricane or put a stop to droughts or floods, is there?

Okay, but what about the people both ancient and modern who have sought meaning in life by having lots of different experiences? You know the type: always jetting off to a new destination or checking some exciting new activity off of their “bucket list.” But as verse 8 asks, are they ever satisfied with what they see and hear? Or do they start planning their next vacation as soon as they get home?

And what about those who devote themselves to making a mark on history, trying to leave a legacy that will be remembered? Is that really possible? Think, for example about Ulysses S. Grant, who probably rode right by this church after winning the Battle of Port Gibson in 1863. After taking Vicksburg, and then after defeating General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, Grant was elected President of the United States. He served two terms in that office, and then became a best-selling author, as his memoirs continue to be in print today. After his death in 1885, he was interred in the largest mausoleum in the Western Hemisphere, located on Riverside Drive near Columbia University in New York City. If anyone could leave a lasting legacy, it would be General Grant, right?

But less than 100 years after his death, his tomb had become so neglected and vandalized that it required \$1.8 million to restore it. Worse yet, just two years ago, a San Francisco mob tore down a statue of him that had been erected in that city. And why? Because the so-called “woke” mob thought

that the man who won the war that destroyed slavery – was a racist. As Solomon put it, for those who only consider what is under the sun to be important, “there is no remembrance of earlier things.”

Yes, without God in our lives, Solomon is absolutely right. No forces of nature, no human experiences, no pursuit of fame can possibly give our lives any meaning. Looking at the world through lenses that only see the things of this world can thus yield only meaninglessness and despair.

Ah, but when we raise our eyes above the sun, when we see the world with a heavenly perspective, when we realize the magnitude of Jesus’ sacrifice for unworthy sinners like us, when we bow before His sovereign grace and devote our lives to His worship and service, well, we see the world in a whole different way, don’t we?

And this is true even where it comes to the worst natural disasters. For example, many of us can recall how, in that terrible year of 2005, Hurricane Katrina passed just to our east, and Hurricane Rita passed just to our west. But instead of maintaining a worldly perspective and just considering ourselves “lucky,” we Mississippi Presbyterians gave God the glory for His mercy, praising Him for our deliverance. And then, we took advantage of the fact that we still had lights and water, and started sending truckloads of supplies to the coast, along with frozen casseroles to feed the hundreds of workers who came from all over the country to help. In the midst of the devastation, those of us who look above the sun glorified God by reaching out in love to those in need.

And you know what? From the same sort of heavenly perspective, we can even see that those terrible storms brought blessings to the coast along with all that devastation. After all, many of the congregations on the coast were revitalized precisely because of their sufferings, and are now reaching out to their surrounding communities in ways they never did before. No, for us Christians, the forces of nature aren’t empty of meaning. No, when God sends His winds and waves, we respond to His divine will with praise and service and with greater devotion to His sovereign providence.

In fact, we know that we human beings aren’t the only ones who praise the One Who is above the sun in such a way. As our responsive reading from Psalm 148 reminds us, the sun itself, along with the moon and all the stars glorify the Lord as they reflect His light and His order, progressing as they do in their brilliant yet predictable paths across the sky. The hail and snow and clouds and stormy wind praise the Lord by fulfilling His Word, accomplishing His purposes and moving exactly when and where He commands.

Moreover, the psalmist insists that people of every age and stage, people from every class and station should join in God’s praise. Instead of keeping our gaze on the things “under the sun,” instead of being selfishly concerned only with the fun we can have in life, we should desire to draw near to the Lord. Instead of worrying about how future generations might remember us, we should long for the Lord to praise His godly ones, for the Lord to remember our faithfulness even if everyone else forgets.

So, sure, we can go on living like the unbelievers do, acting like the things “under the sun” are all that matter. But that’s only a recipe for futility and frustration, for disappointment and despair. Instead, let us lift our eyes to the heavens, to the One Who alone can bring the deepest of meaning to our everyday lives. Let us draw near to Jesus Christ, our prophet and priest and king, the One Who suffered and bled and died for us, the One Who rose from the dead to give us the hope of eternal salvation. Let us tell everyone of His excellent greatness so that they too might lift their eyes to the only One Who can give them the victory over all the brokenness in their lives. And let us join all creation and all the hosts of heaven in singing His praise.