

The Theme

by W.J. Erdman

The sermon delves into the existential quest for meaning in life, ultimately concluding that true fulfillment lies in enjoying life's gifts and revering God.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:2, Ecclesiastes 2:11, Ecclesiastes 3:11, Ecclesiastes 9:9, Ecclesiastes 12:13

Topics: "Ecclesiastes Study", "Fear Of God"

Description

W.J. Erdman preaches on the book of Ecclesiastes, where the Preacher, a wise man under the sun, seeks to answer the age-old question of the chief good in life and the true purpose of labor. The Preacher, viewed as a natural man, conducts experiments and observations to find meaning in a world filled with vanity and vexation of spirit. Despite his wisdom and seriousness, he grapples with despair and the mysteries of life, ultimately concluding that the true gain lies in fearing God and keeping His commandments.

Transcript

The Theme of the book is a Proof that the great " conclusion " is but the best and final word of the natural man. All its experiences, confessions, observations and exhortations are bound together by the one great question of wise men of olden time among other nations and peoples: What is the chief good? What should man labor for as the true gain? What is the noblest thing under the sun? Is life worth living? Is there any profit; any surplus, substantial, enduring, that remains from all his labor and toil?

The Good is first sought in the goods of life, and then in some true Rule for the Conduct of Life; so dividing the Book into two equal parts.

Before following the Preacher in his great quest it should be noted that he is to be viewed as a man who himself belongs under the sun. Whether the word Koheleth is rendered " Preacher," " Debater" or "Assembler " or " One of an Assembly," the whole tenor of the teaching proves it is Wisdom from under the sun, Natural Wisdom, that is speaking. The wisest of men undertakes to observe and experiment with life under the sun, in order to find out for all men the outcome of all his searchings, and then rehearses all to an assembly of his fellows. He is not supposed, as already mentioned, to know any divinely-revealed wisdom, or to have heard of a righteousness of faith or of divine mercy or of forgiveness of sins. He is to make answer as a natural man to whom are given the resources and helps common to natural men, only he is wiser and richer than they, and so must bring the final answer for all. And also he is a Hebrew and knows of the one living and true God. When he says " thou," in advice or warning, it is not so much to

some disciple or " son " he is speaking as to himself, or he is then assuming a high ground, far above " the madding crowd," but it is soon apparent how, in these most exalted frames of the pious and philosophic mind, he is still only a natural man, for he is found, soon after, in the depth of despair uttering his disgust and hate of life and exclaiming: "The whole is Vapor and a chasing of the wind." That " thou " is, after all, a sign that he is talking to himself, telling what he and all men under the sun ought to do, but utterly fail to do.

Not only does he pronounce the verdict of " Vanity " for all, but he resorts to the same passing mirthful enjoyment he commends to all; but he would do it all before God. He is indeed wiser and more serious than other men, only to become more perplexed and sorrowful than they.

On him hangs more heavily than on other men

" .the burden of the mystery

". . . the heavy and the weary weight

" Of all this unintelligible world."

He, if any, can say, " I know there is nothing better for them." He is king and can lay the whole world under contribution to furnish the means for answer. " What can the man do who cometh after the king? "

He repeatedly says, " I have seen all the works that are done," " all the oppressions," and " all the labor I labored at." And so he is to speak for the world, for the race, for man, high and low, wise and foolish, rich and poor, in hut and hall, living and dying. And he speaks as before God. He, of all men, feels a strange fear, seeing that somehow man's imperfect vain life under the sun is mysteriously related to and controlled by the unalterable purpose and work of God.

The Method also of the Search is peculiar. It is a speculative question, to be settled not by a process of reasoning, but by personal experience, wise experimentation and wide observation. It is asked and answered, not in classic form, but with Hebrew cast and coloring, uttering the heart of man, and in such manner that the book becomes a universal book, true for men in all nations and times.

That "all is Vanity of Vanities and Vexation of Spirit," -- " Vapor of Vapors, all Vapor, a Feeding on the Wind," is not the thing to be proved, but the thing that was found. It is not taken for granted at the start. It is " by wisdom " the answer shall be given. The "Preacher" says that in every experience and experimentation his wisdom remained with him; he never lets any experience so overcome him as to blind him to its " vain " significance. All is serious, solemn work. The answer to the great question is sought in thoughtful earnestness, in spite of pathetic failures and melancholy conclusions. This is man out of Christ, face to face with nature and her riddle, with man and his enigma, with God and His mystery; and the answer to each is full of temporary contradictions and half truths, for so is man without God. He asserts and recants, to assert again; he renews the quest from various points; he sees the final far-off truth at long intervals from height to height, while the valleys of man's vain life and depths of dark despair lie between.

Make what we will of the book when trying to extract anything " evangelical " or " spiritual " out of it; it remains the book of " men," not of " saints; " and yet it is religious, for the natural man is religious, feeling after God, confessing Him in conscience and dreading death for fear of what shall be after death.

Finally, it should be noted before following the Seeker, that in the course of the investigation two Chief Conclusions are reached which serve as a Resort from the vain experiences, profitless labors, and unsolvable problems of life; the first, Enjoy the good things of life and its works, and be thankful to God for the "chance" and the power of enjoyment; this is the good and the comely; and the second, Fear God and keep His commandments, for His judgment is coming.

To the first the Seeker often resorts; a present joy in present labor he sees early, but it is found at last to be confessedly a comfort less and uncertain conclusion.

The earlier restful confidence disappears, a tremor of fear is felt throughout its utterance; for death is the end of all, not only cutting off further enjoyment, but also opening the way to the judgment that is coming.

And the very good things themselves are seen to become a source of evil and vexation of spirit. The rich man may be without the power of enjoyment; days of darkness will be many; and to the poor man and to the oppressed, who have no comfort or good, such conclusion but vexes, making life more hateful and its mystery more unintelligible. "This also is vanity."

Yet again, man will rouse himself to his fruitless toil and endeavor; he is more than the beast he drives or the clod he treads upon; and once more he seeks to attain the height of his great argument, and only to fail again.

To the second Conclusion, the final and abiding one, the whole vacillating course of the search for the Chief Good under the sun steadily moves. It is found at last, that among all the vanities and contradictions, perplexities and philosophies under the sun, this is " the good " for man wherewith to exercise himself, this is the final all-explaining event in the great future; this, the rule of the conduct of life, in obedience to which will be found also the highest good and real joy.

An earlier, though less abiding, so-called conclusion, and to which resort was had only at the first experience of disappointment and despair, may also be noted, that Life under the sun is hateful in view of the one event of death common to all; for death cuts off all work, and its fruit and enjoyment.

Later on, however, even life, with its fleeting insubstantial mirage, is deemed preferable to the gloom and oblivion of the under world. But from the beginning to the end, in view of the sure event of death, a sigh is often heard, as in a more modern day, " Why can not we always be young! " or of an older, " Life is the dream of a shadow." The natural man wants life to go on; he seeks some solid surplus, " profit " that will remain after all his toil and moil, some residuum of joy after the enjoyment.

The Progress of the Quest.

Before the Preacher begins the narration of the order of his investigation he gives, in the very opening of the Book, not only the result of all, which is vanity, but a symbol of the unprogressive, monotonous character of life under the sun, in the phenomena of the natural world around him. He sees in nature the reflex and mirror of man's endless toil and endeavor.

It is the life of man on earth, bound by natural law, beholding, in the monotonous turning of the wheel of nature, himself and his vain and unchanging, ever-recurring experiences; his prospects but retrospects; the world ceaselessly spinning in its round, its new things but old things, an out-lived worn-out thing; his soul like the sea never full, like the wind never at rest; and to whom the possession of wisdom, in such a world of unsolvable problems, is the saddest and most grievous possession of all. Yea, the very abiding of

the earth and the returning seasons, while man once gone is gone forever, makes human life more sad and vain.

But this opening confession of the book, concerning the vanity of life and its monotonous unchangeableness, and of the sorrows of wisdom, is the result of the search and not an anticipation.

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