

SEEING OURSELVES IN THE MIRROR OF ECCLESIASTES

“For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.” ~ Jas. 1.23-24

As we study Ecclesiastes, can we see ourselves in its mirror? Our responsibility as we see mankind described in Solomon’s words is to learn and to respond accordingly. Let us not “learn much” and then walk away unchanged. As Solomon describes us (warts and all), let us learn and change.

Man is God’s _____.

Solomon frequently uses a specific term for man in Ecclesiastes: _____. Forty-nine times, he refers to mankind using the first that Scripture uses for man: Gen. 1.26. By using this term, Solomon shows his knowledge of the _____ of Genesis: he describes mankind with a word that identifies man as God’s creation. That first use of the word “adam” grows out of the Hebrew word “adamah” which means “_____” or “earth.” This ought to provoke us to _____: “for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (Eccl. 5.2).

Man is a _____.

At least twelve times, “man” and “labor” come together in the same sentence.

- Labor produces _____, not fulfillment.
 - “Labor” refers to exertion, _____ or hard work.
 - 1.3: What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
 - 2.22: For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart ... ?
 - 6.7: All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.
 - This dark side of *work* also reflects Genesis: it echoes the curse of Gen. 3.18-19. Ecclesiastes never overtly raises the question “Why all this vanity?”, but it does point the reader to the answer: vanity in life is a result of man’s _____. In describing our life’s work as toil and vexation, Solomon is not being pessimistic or sarcastic; he is realistically describing life in a world that has been marred by sin.

- _____ in the fruit of one’s labor is a gift from God.

- 2.24: *There is* nothing better for a man, *than* that ... he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it *was* from the hand of God.
- 3.13: And also that every man should ... enjoy the good of all his labour, *it is* the gift of God.
- Labor in this life is not a dead-end street, however. God gives men the gift of enjoying the fruit of their work.

In sharp contrast to God (whose kingdom rules over all things – Ps. 103.19), man is pictured here as a worker. Not as a CEO, area director, or even a mid-level manager: we are merely common laborers in this life. This sharp pin of Solomon’s accurate assessment of mankind swiftly deflates the pride, arrogance and presumption that regularly characterize our actions, words and thoughts. As a result of sin, life under the sun is hard. Yet God does provide a contented enjoyment in the midst of the blood, sweat and tears of our earthly toil.

Man is _____.

- Limited in _____
 - 8.8: *There is* no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither *hath he* power in the day of death: and *there is* no discharge in *that* war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.
- Limited in _____
 - 3.11: No man can find out the work that God maketh ...
 - 7.14: In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.
 - 9.1: No man knoweth either love or hatred *by* all *that is* before them.
 - 10.14: A man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?
- Limited in _____
 - 3.18-19: I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity.
- Limited in _____
 - 7.2: *It is* better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that *is* the end of all men; and the living will lay *it* to his heart.
 - 9.12: For man also knoweth not his time: ... it falleth suddenly upon them.
 - 12.5: Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:
- Limited in _____
 - 2.26: For *God* giveth to a man that *is* good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap

- up, that he may give to *him that is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.
- 3.10: I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.

Every time we turn a page, it seems that Solomon is screaming, “Finite, needy, limited, dependent!” Any pretense of self-sufficiency that man could muster up is knocked down flat in the verses of Ecclesiastes.

Man is _____.

- 7.20: For *there is* not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.
- 7.29: God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.
- 8.11: The heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.
- 9.3: The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness *is* in their heart ...

Not a flattering description, is it? You don’t need the Romans Road to convince someone of his depravity: Ecclesiastes does that quite thoroughly.

Conclusion

Ecclesiastes’ description of man is a clear contrast to its description of God. While God is high, lofty, sovereign and powerful, man is low, sinful, limited and weak. The line that divides the structure of this book in half is Eccl. 6.10-12: “*That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it is man: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he.*”¹¹ *Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?*”¹² *For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”* This passage begins with an allusion back to Gen. 2.19: “*Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.*” It clearly points to man’s inability to fight with God – from the first Adam to the present day, our arms are still too short to box with God. Verse 11 rightly questions mankind’s failure to produce any real improvement in life over generations. The question about “know[ing] what is good for man” hints back at Adam’s first sin at the tree of *knowledge of good and evil*. Adam’s 930 years passed as a shadow in comparison to the whole of human history and so will our threescore and ten (or perhaps fourscore) years of vain life! And who among us can predict events that will occur after we’ve died? In short, for all of history, man is weak, sinful, limited and lowly. When we look up to an exalted God who creates and sustains all life and rules all things, should it surprise us at all that we must fear and obey such a God?