

PUTTING IT ALL BACK TOGETHER: PART ONE

Introduction

The structure of the book of Ecclesiastes is tightly woven and difficult to untangle. Some sense can be made of the book by giving attention to key phrases that are repeated throughout the book. After an opening poem about the endless circularity of nature, Solomon presents a two-fold _____ (1.12-18). He desires generally to seek and explore all that has been done under heaven (12-15), but more specifically, to know wisdom and madness and folly (16-18). He realizes, though, that even his endeavor is vanity and chasing after wind. The phrase "chasing after wind" only occurs between 1.12 and 6.9. There is also a very heavy concentration of discussion of the "toil" or "labor" of man in those verses. The idea in this first division is that man's toil is just wind-chasing.

Because the fruit of man's labors is transitory, you must balance enjoyment with the fear of God (2.1-6.9).

The word "_____" is used 18 times in this section of the book. Solomon looks at all the works and achievements a human can manage, both from his experience and his observation. His conclusion is uniform: all is vanity and striving after wind. The phrase "vexation of spirit" could be literally rendered "shepherding the _____" and pictures an almost comical attempt to control something that can't be caught. Just as the wind blows one moment and stills the next, the labors of man are transitory and provide no real satisfaction.

- **You cannot find satisfaction in any amount of experience (2.1-11, 18-26).**

As he told us in 1.12-15, Solomon tries to seek and _____ all that has been done under heaven. In 2.1-11, he chronicles his personal search for satisfaction in doing things. He tests himself with quite a list of achievements: he looks to pleasure, wine, great works (including houses and parks), possessions (slaves and flocks), treasure, music and intimate personal relationships. Yet nowhere can he find something solid to hold onto. His evaluation of this search is in verse 11: "all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun." In verses 18-26, he returns to an evaluation of his personal labor and toil: not only was the labor itself profitless, he hates its _____! Solomon realized that no matter how much he built or achieved or acquired for himself, he would leave it all behind to a successor who hadn't worked for it! How pointless is that? Solomon bemoans the answer-less puzzle of leaving his acquisitions to someone who could turn out to be a fool (and did - I Kings 12!), but he does offer appropriate advice. In 2.24-26 we find the first statement of the celebratory theme that runs throughout the book.

Since nothing that one can do will bring lasting ultimate fulfillment, Solomon wisely advises his readers to _____ the life that God has given them. Verse 24 contains three important truths that make Solomon's advice more than mere Epicureanism. First, he advises eating and drinking – this is not an exhaustive statement of the totality of existence, but rather an exhortation to enjoy the material provision that you have. Second, be _____ with your labor. It may be frustrating and it may seem ultimately pointless, but let it be good in your sight. Third, recognize that your lot in life is from God. He's the One who put you where you are, gave you what you have, and provides enjoyment for your life. You will not find ultimate satisfaction in anything you can do, but you can enjoy what God has given you.

- **You will not see satisfaction with any amount of observation (2.12-17; 3.1-6.9).**

In answering the second part of his stated purpose (1.16-18), Solomon endeavors to know wisdom, folly and madness (2.12). Rather than experimenting with folly and madness in his own life, Solomon turns to _____ to answer this question (a wise choice!). Solomon says in 2.12 that he turned to consider (literally, *to see*) and the phrases “I saw” and “I have seen” occur 11 times in 2.12-17 and 3.1-6.9. Nearly every topic is introduced with this phrase. The first thing that Solomon saw is that wisdom is better than folly, but death strikes wise men and fools alike. This is vanity and “shepherding the wind” (2.17).

In 3.1-15, Solomon sees “the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves” (10). God has set all times and they flow in a sort of _____ and repetition (3.1-8), yet He has placed timelessness (*eternity*, not the physical world) in men's hearts. God's reason for this anomaly: He deliberately _____ man from finding His works (3.13; cf., chs. 7-8)! And Solomon's response to this enigma – not vanity! Rather he again exhorts men to enjoy what God has given them! You may not understand what's ultimately happening, but you can trust God, enjoy His provisions, *and* fear Him (13-14).

Solomon goes on to _____ all that he saw: wickedness where justice and righteousness ought to have been (3.16-22), oppression (4.1-6); the vanity of leaving behind an inheritance (4.7-16); oppression committed by nobility (5.8-20); and wealth without enjoyment (6.1-9).

Conclusion

Throughout these observations, Solomon records his evaluation: _____ (3.19; 4.4, 7, 8, 16; 5.6, 9; 6.2, 4, 9), _____ the wind (4.4, 6, 16; 6.9), _____ exhortation (3.12-13; 22; 5.18-20), and _____ God (3.14; 5.7). Solomon told us that he wanted to search out all that is done and, specifically, to know wisdom and folly. He did everything possible to find satisfaction in what he could do, and he watched everything around him to learn wisdom and folly. And where has this pursuit led? All is vanity – a puzzle with no solution. All is wind-herding – a fruitless attempt to grasp the intangible. Yet there is still instruction to take away from this evaluation: because the fruit of your labors is transitory, you must _____ what God has appointed for you and _____ Him.