

Ecclesiastes: A Wonderful (Brief) Life

Sept. 9, 2018

To KNOW Christ and one another more deeply,
To CARE for one another in truth and in love,
To GROW as followers of Jesus.
- CG Mission Statement

Worship: Revelation 21:1-5

(Here is a psalm/song to help your group as you worship.)

Read Revelation 21:1-5 using the prayer practice of Lectio Divina. Read the passage aloud 3 times. After each reading, spend a few minutes reflecting. After the first reading, open yourself to the presence of God. On the second reading, listen for a certain word or phrase that stands out to you. On the third reading, listen to what God's invitation might be for you.

Icebreaker

What would you consider one of your great accomplishments...which didn't bring the joy you expected?

Text for Discussion: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Turn in your Bibles and read this passage aloud together.

Aid for Discussion: Sermon Summary

Ecclesiastes is strikingly unique. Herman Melville called it the truest of all books. It poses the question that the other sixty-five books of the Bible set out to answer. Why are we here? And what do we make of the riddle of our existence – the unfathomable reality of life?

Whom is Ecclesiastes meant for? The thoughtful. The bored and weary. Skeptics and doubters. It's meant for those who suffer, as well as for those who've watched a loved one suffer. It's for those who are sick of sentimentality. For pessimists and cynics. Those angry and confused at the unmet expectations of their lives. Ecclesiastes is for those of us who are *so busy* that we never stop to ask why. It's a book abounding in tensions, offering credibility to the Bible for our doubting minds... because it asks the question to which Christ alone is the answer.

It's a wisdom book, teaching us how to thrive in this world. These were lessons King Solomon had unique opportunities to learn, having achieved unparalleled wealth, power, fame, wisdom and success. He realized that each of these is so temporary as to be considered empty – literally "vapor" – and ultimately meaningless.

Life will rarely make sense. Nor will it be fair, so we should stop expecting it to. It's our lot to be discontent with our portion in life. And we try to cope in a variety of ways: work and worry, the pursuit of wealth or wisdom or fame, fighting injustice or embracing selfish immorality. But we'll never find contentment by adding to our lives. Nor will it come through a change in our circumstances, for as Socrates said, if we're not content with what we have, we won't be content with what we'd like to have.

Nature itself echoes these truths. Ecclesiastes describes a world of vigorous activity but chronic weariness. There is so much busyness, but no progress or ultimate gain from all our toil. Rivers run constantly to the ocean, yet it never fills. We wake the next day, and just like the sun, we're back where we started. Left to ourselves, we cannot figure out life's meaning. This book wounds us so that we might be healed and find freedom. It's not pessimistic; it's urging us toward joy. It just needs to sink in that joy in this life won't come from where we expect. Our expectations need to be reset.

Yes, life is often superficial, incomprehensible and frustrating. We feel like God hasn't provided the life we've hoped for and expected. But how can we find meaning and purpose – especially if nothing in this life can be

counted on beyond death? If we accept that no mountain we climb will ever bring us lasting happiness, where does that leave us? “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecc 12:13).

The fear of God is knowing our place by living in awareness of God’s presence and in awe of His transcendent holiness. It banishes anxiety about the future, guilt from our past, and boredom from the present. Why? Because now is the only moment we have to trust and obey God. Making God our highest joy allows us to enjoy the lesser, fleeting joys of His creation. With everything put in its proper place, Ecclesiastes becomes an invitation to delight in the day that is before us. In its wisdom, it says there is nothing new under the sun, but every verse compels us to place our faith in a Savior who can make all things new, so that we might find joy in this brief, absurd, wonderful life.

Guiding Question of the Week

(This question is intended as a target for the whole conversation. Do not ask for responses now. It will be repeated later in the study.)

How can the book of Ecclesiastes help us reset our expectations?

Questions for Discussion

(Remember it is better to wrestle deeply with two good questions than gloss over many. Sub-bullets are intended for potential follow-up.)

Opening Questions/Digging In...

- After reading Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, what stood out to you?
- Given this introductory message for the series, what most excites, intrigues or interests you about the book to come?
- The book of Ecclesiastes is for the Skeptic, Doubter, Suffering, Sick of clichés, Contrarian, Pessimist, Cynic, Bored, Weary and Busy. Which one of these do you identify with and why?
- What are your impressions of the Preacher in 1:1-11? What does he want us to know?
- In what situations have you expressed similar feelings of frustration conveyed in this passage?
- From what point of view is the Preacher looking at human toil?
- What might you be running after? To what do you look for contentment? (pleasure, power, possessions, wisdom)
- Discuss the idea that Ecclesiastes asks the questions to which Christ is the answer. What expectations would you like to reset?
- “Fear God.” How does your heart react to that? How does your head? What does it mean to you?
- What is your reaction to hearing of the writer of Ecclesiastes' life experiences? How do you feel about his reaction to his successes

Experiment of the week

(A suggestion for engagement in following the way of Jesus this week)

The Preacher tells us that joy and contentment will not come to us from where we think. Socrates told us if we are not content with what we have we will not be content with what we would like to have. This week, read the entire book of Ecclesiastes looking for mentions of joy (8x). Journal your thoughts on what you learn and share with the CG at the next meeting.