

**Ecclesiastes No. 2****Ecclesiastes 2:1-26****“So I hated life...”****April 1, 2012****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Last time, in introducing the book of Ecclesiastes, we noted that biblical interpreters understand Ecclesiastes in dramatically different ways making it one of the most difficult books of the Bible to understand. On the one hand, in the opinion of many interpreters the book contains the ruminations of a man who, for whatever reason, does not look upon the world from the vantage point of true faith in God. For some it is because he lived in the epoch before Jesus Christ and was understandably plagued by the ignorance of the full gospel that would come only with the appearance of Jesus Christ. For others it was because he was simply a man who had been battered by the disappointments of life into either a very weak faith in God or no faith at all. On the other hand, other interpreters hear in Ecclesiastes nothing but the voice of truth, relentlessly realistic as so much of the Bible, but helpfully practical in reminding us of the limitations of our understanding so long as we live “under the sun.” Some will even say that, setting us free from the need to explain and understand what we cannot explain and cannot understand, Ecclesiastes shows us the path to true happiness in life. While Prof. Tremper Longman argues that there is much in Ecclesiastes that can’t be squared with the teaching of the rest of the Bible, I argued and will argue tonight that in fact virtually everything you find in this book you can find taught elsewhere in the Bible, OT and NT alike.

We considered *hebel*, the key term in the book, the Hebrew word translated variously as “vanity,” “meaninglessness,” “absurdity,” or “senselessness.” We pointed out that again and again throughout the book the author uses the term to describe life as it so often seems to observers, even men and women of faith. So much in life seems genuinely senseless, and, in a world ordered and controlled by God, genuinely absurd. While there is much in human experience to justify man’s universal standards of morality, the actual life of the world often makes a mockery of those standards. While we naturally expect God to act justly, the one who rules over all in fact permits the grossest forms of injustice and often seems indifferent to the evil that men do. While God has put it in the human heart, and even more in a mother’s heart, passionately to love little children, throughout the ages and still today they die like flies. The whole panoply of human experience drips with irony, the incongruity between the actual result and what was expected. Why do people everywhere act so obviously and with such determination against their own best interests? There is something profoundly ridiculous about human existence. Take for example the fact that no matter how poorly or well a person lives, death overtakes everyone in the same way. And on and on it goes.

But, at the same time, we pointed out how much this same man trusts the Lord, counts on his goodness and even his justice; however long it may be in coming. There is some bracing, hard-hitting realism in Ecclesiastes, to be sure, but there is a sturdy faith as well.

Tonight we take up a characteristic passage of the book, 2:1-6, or, at least characteristic among those passages that have troubled many readers by seeming to fail to describe life as we expect a biblical writer to describe it. Where is heaven in his account? Where is the love of God for his people? Where is the promise of eventual resolution according to the justice of God?

But before we read our text let me draw your attention to another highly interesting and important fact about Ecclesiastes. *The personal name of the Lord does not appear in the book.* God in Ecclesiastes is *Elohim* not *Yahweh*. He is God, not the Lord. He is the creator, not the redeemer. He is the sovereign Judge, not his people's protector. As we noted last time there is no mention of God's covenant with Israel, though the man is obviously an Israelite. There is no mention of the exodus, the great act of redemption at the foundation of Israel's history. This is not, by itself, somehow unbiblical. Biblical writers can talk about life without reference to these things. Esther doesn't make mention of God at all, by any name. But it is unusual. Proverbs doesn't mention God's covenant but it uses God's covenant name, *Yahweh*, throughout. On the other hand, when Paul addresses the philosophers in Athens in Acts 17, he likewise refers to a common belief in God that he shared with those Gentiles. He doesn't mention Jesus by name anywhere in his speech, says nothing about his birth in Bethlehem to a virgin or his death on the cross, and refers, and only at the end of his address, to his resurrection from the dead. Otherwise his argument is about God as creator, as judge, and as lord of time. We have something similar here in Ecclesiastes. The argument being made is not based on the facts of redemption but on the facts of creation and providence, facts that at a certain level would not have been contested even by pagans in the ANE world. Atheism as we know it in the modern west was virtually unknown in that time and place. This man, as Paul in Acts 17, takes it as a given that men know that God is their creator and that he rules over this world. *In writing to Israelites especially as he was, he could take a great deal of theological knowledge for granted and he does.*

Again, as we have pointed out already, James in the New Testament takes a somewhat similar tack, basing much of his exhortation on the facts of experience rather than the story of redemption. It is wise us for us to remember, especially in our world, that those facts, the facts anyone can see, the facts that every honest person knows, are an unassailable argument for our faith and that that the bleak reality of life in this world is a foundation for our message to a dying world. It is the Christian who should never cease to draw people's attention to the hopelessness of their situation apart from Christ. Any honest person should be able to see it.

What is more, it is certainly interesting, and striking enough to have been noticed by many commentators, that the part of the Bible to which Ecclesiastes shows the most affinity is the early

chapters of Genesis and especially its account of the creation and the fall. In fact, it is not too much to say that Ecclesiastes is something of a commentary on the meaning of the fall as it is reported in Genesis 3. There we read that because of his sin man has been separated from the life-sustaining presence of God (3:22-24), that the earth has been made subject to a curse (3:17-18), that man's work, before a wonderfully satisfying part of his life, has now become toil (3:19), and that looming over all his life will be the shadow of death (3:19-20). All of these themes reappear with emphasis in Ecclesiastes.

Here too we read of the world standing under judgment (3:17), that death is the inevitable destiny of every human being – indeed, as in Genesis 3 his fate is linked to the fate of animals – (3:19-20), indeed we even have in 3:20 a citation of Genesis 3:19 in the statement that “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.” We have that phrase – “and the dust returns to the earth” – again in 12:7. In 9:3 we have a remark about the hearts of men being full of evil that is very like what the Lord said in Genesis 6:5-6 in explaining why he was going to destroy mankind with a flood. In fact, we learn a good bit about the comprehensive sinfulness of the human race in Ecclesiastes.

“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” [7:20]

But even more interesting, again confirming that the Genesis creation/fall narrative lies beneath the reflections of this author,

“See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” [7:29]

In other words, look at the world and what do you see? You see man with a moral nature, a nature he cannot escape and to which he bears witness every moment of every day, whether in his own guilty conscience or in his constant passing judgment on the behavior of others. He has within himself the knowledge of right and wrong, but you find him doing what he knows is wrong: he plans to do wrong, he does wrong again after his sins have risen up and bitten him; he can't stop doing wrong. What we have in Ecclesiastes is an extended meditation on the creation and on the fall. Indeed, just before that statement about God having made man upright but he is now a sinner we have this:

“And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.”

It is hard to imagine that this author did not have Eve in the Garden in his mind when he wrote those words. So read the book in light of the author's perspective: the universal experience of life

and what can be learned by observation of this life “under the sun.” There is a great deal more to say about everything than Ecclesiastes teaches us, or for that matter than we read in James or in Paul’s address to the Athenians, but what we read in those books and in that passage is not for that reason any less true or any less important. Sometimes a truth needs to be expounded by itself, with all the bark on, and no effort made to soften it by qualifying it with truth from elsewhere in the Word of God.

### **Text Comment**

v.3 All people want to be happy. The Bible often trades on this fact. The Lord Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount with an appeal to that fact. But very few people are always happy and a great many even very good people are often, if not usually, sad about one thing or another and sometimes about a number of things. They seek happiness, no, they crave it; but either do not find it or not much of it, or what they find does not last. Remember, if you are one of those fortunate folk who are usually enjoying the pleasures of life, the Bible speaks not primarily about the exception but the rule. There is a lot of woe in this vale of tears we call our world. What is more, even our pleasures often turn out to be the cause of pain and hardship. It is the paradox of hedonism that the more you seek pleasure and the more you find certain sorts of pleasure, the less pleasure you enjoy. How many souls have been damaged or destroyed by things that ought to be and might have been perfectly wonderful and immensely satisfying: sex, food, wine, medication to eliminate pain, power, fame, success, and all the rest. What is stranger still – senseless, absurd really – is that the evidence that this is true is all around us but we continue to crave what will not make us happy. Isn’t there something absurd about that? Listen to two wise men reflecting on these facts of life. First, Malcolm Muggeridge.

“Human beings, as Pascal points out, are peculiar in that they avidly pursue ends they know will bring them no satisfaction; gorge themselves with food which cannot nourish and with pleasures which cannot please. I am a prime example.”  
[*Chronicles of Wasted Time*, 81]

This next voice is that of the great Thomas Boston.

“The world hath all along been a stepdame to me; and wheresoever I would have attempted to nestle in it, there was a thorn of uneasiness laid for me. Man is born crying, lives complaining, and dies disappointed from that quarter.” [ *Memoirs*, 476]

So long as one’s perspective remains that of living “under the sun,” there remains something deeply absurd and confusing about the perfectly obvious delights of human

life and their failure to satisfy the needs of human life. This is true even for men and women of faith. Do you understand why even the wisest and holiest of men find their pleasures mocking them in life? I confess I don't.

- v.11 The description of vv. 4-11 certainly seems to be of Solomon though it seems a little strange that he refers to all those who came before him in Jerusalem when there were but two kings before him. Whether the author of the book is Solomon remains a question. He may or may not have been the author. The reference to him may be a literary device on the author's part. As we said last time, the rest of the book does not read as if written by Solomon and there are some statements that don't seem to fit Solomon at all. Perhaps he is simply citing Solomon as an example of his thesis. But perhaps it is Solomon who wrote the book after all.
- v.14 The word the ESV rightly translates as "event" occurs seven times in Ecclesiastes. The associated verb occurs three more times. The NIV had "fate," but that implies something this word does not. It is neutral and has no sinister nuance. [Eaton, 69] It simply means "what happens" or "something that happens." According to Ecclesiastes there are a great many things that "happen" in the world, many of them bad. In the book the word usually refers to the event of death. *From all appearances that is the nature of death; it just happens!*
- v.16 He does not deny that it is better to be wise than a fool. But from man's perspective "under the sun" wisdom doesn't solve the problem of death. Death and disappearance from the memory of others happens as well to the wise as it does to the foolish. It doesn't seem as if that should be so – it might seem, certainly we wish there would be a great difference between the death of the wise and the death of the foolish – but usually death treats the both pretty much the same. If wisdom is so much better, why don't worldly people recognize that? And the answer is that they can't see the difference clearly enough because so much in life happens as well to one as to the other. Fools get rich and the wise suffer troubles and they both die from the same accidents, illnesses, and old age. There are some Reformed authors, Meredith Kline for example, who have argued that there is no evidence at all, at least empirical evidence, no evidence we can see, to suggest that God blesses the righteous more than the wicked. To believe that he does is an act of faith pure and simple because there isn't any evidence for that conclusion. I don't believe that to be the case at all, but the fact remains that there isn't so much of that evidence that the unbelieving world is forced to admit as it were, against its better judgment, that Christians do much better in life than unbelievers do.

You have a contrary perspective in Proverbs 10: "The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will not." But both perspectives are true and

obviously true. That is so typical of biblical teaching, as we have learned through the years: something is true in one sense, it is not true in another. In one sense this; in another sense that.

- v.23 One of the most remarkable features of the life of man, the demonstration of his god-like nature, is his remarkable capacity for accomplishment. When man puts his mind to it and works hard he can do the most amazing things. It has always been this way. He can build the most wonderful things (from the great pyramids to modern skyscrapers), discover the most astonishing things (from how to write a language to the inner workings of the atom), and make the most beautiful things (from the hanging gardens of Babylon to the Taj Mahal to Michelangelo's *Pieta*). From Homer's epic poetry to the Roman aqueducts; from the astronomy of the ancients to the artistry of the renaissance painters; from steam engines to airplanes to quantum mechanics and space travel, man is a marvel. But after all that achievement the world is effectively the same mess it has always been, great achievement is typically squandered, and personal achievement in particular is hardly any guarantee that the next generation will profit as we might have expected. Rehoboam managed to lose virtually all that his father Solomon acquired in the first few years of his reign. The best educated population in Europe elected Adolph Hitler and the wealthiest and most powerful country in the history of mankind is, as we speak, coming apart morally and spiritually, seemingly unable to deal successfully with its mounting problems. Pastor Krulish showed me an article this past week from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, one of a great many articles on this theme that are being written these days, regarding the state of young manhood in the United States, the disgust with men that is increasingly being voiced by the women of our country, and the rootlessness, foolishness, and laziness of the rising generation of American males. The men of my generation are finding, as *Qohelet* warned them long ago, that they may well have to leave what they spent their lives to acquire to someone who neither knows how to work nor appreciates the satisfaction of real accomplishment or how to appreciate the accomplishment of those who went before him.
- v.26 We hardly expect the turn that the final verses of the chapter represent. This doesn't sound like great misfortune (v. 21), despair (v. 20), or the hatred of life (v. 17) of which the author had been speaking. Now it is the pleasure of good food and drink, the satisfaction of work, wisdom, knowledge, and even *joy*, and all of it from God. *We said that there is much about the Fall in Ecclesiastes; but there is much about the goodness of creation as well.*

What is more, v. 26 seems to be virtually a contradiction of v. 21. In the latter verse what a sinner acquires in life, God will see is eventually given to someone who is godly. In the former the godly's achievements are left behind to someone who is unlikely to appreciate

it. There will be much more of this stark dialectic – this juxtaposition of opposites – in Ecclesiastes. We find a great deal of it elsewhere in the Bible as you know. Think, for example, of the two proverbs side by side in Proverbs 26:4-5 that tell us first not to answer a fool and then to answer him. Or think of Paul in Romans 6 and 7: first the triumphant declaration that in Christ man is no longer a slave of sin but has been set free to live to God; but soon after the sad confession that Paul himself remains a bond-slave of sin, unable to loose his chains.

As we will read in the opening verses of chapter 3, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Truer words were never spoken!

Another way of describing this good man’s literary style, with such rapid changes of tone and subject, is this.

“[Qohelet’s] natural habitat, so to speak, is among the wise men who teach us to use our eyes as well as our ears to learn the ways of God and man. Some of his sayings could have come straight out of Proverbs, and he has a way of pausing to steady us and give us our bearings by this homely wisdom, at intervals between our more unsettling excursions with him.

“His probing is so relentless that he can easily be mistaken for a skeptic or a pessimist...but there is more to him than can be captured in a phrase... So much more, in fact, that at one time there were scholars ready to suggest that two, or three, or even as many as nine different minds had been at work on the book. Such are its cross-currents and swift changes, but they can all be seen as the insights of a single mind, approaching the facts of life and death from a variety of angles.” [Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*, 13-14]

So far Ecclesiastes chapter two. I want to reflect with you on the way the author of Ecclesiastes uses words. I think some of the misunderstanding of the book originates here. This man was a Hebrew and so he was a product of ancient near eastern culture. The thought in the way people thought in those days and spoke and wrote in ways characteristic of those times. These people spoke and acted *in extremes*. This explains, for example, why there is so much of what we call hyperbole in the Bible. It was not enough for the Hebrew to say that the Lord will save vast multitudes of people or that it was a large army or even a very large army that Israel faced in a battle. No the Lord will save a multitude in number or the army the Israelites faced was in number the same as the grains of sand on the seashore and the stars in the heavens.

Well in matters of emotion middle easterners were – as they are today! – given to very strong displays of emotion. Few of us tear our clothes or walk about with ashes on our head or wail in public but the ancients found it very natural to do all those things. And their language is the same. It is full of extremes. We are likely to call this feature of Hebrew style (actually ANE style) *hyperbole*. But to refer to these extreme ways of saying things as simply a figure of speech does not do it justice. *Hyperbole is our perspective: they are exaggerating for effect*, we think. But what was *their* perspective, these men who wrote Holy Scripture? Here is one scholar commenting on this feature of Hebrew writing.

“Hyperbole or overstatement is a figure of speech common to all languages. But among the Semitic peoples its frequent use arises out of a habitual cast of mind, which I have called absoluteness – a tendency to think in extremes without qualification, in black and white without intervening shades of gray.” [G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 110] Elsewhere this same scholar says, “Hebrews inherited superlatives by choice.” [121]

T.E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia, observed this as he lived among the Arab peoples of the middle east.

“Semites had no half-tones in their register of vision. They were a people of primary colors, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour.” [Cited by Caird from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, ch. 3]

We are familiar with some classic illustrations of this way of thinking and writing, such as the use of “love” and “hate” to describe greater or lesser affection, as when the Lord told us we would have to hate our parents and our own lives if we wanted to be his disciples, or the prayers for terrible judgments to be brought against the king’s enemies that we find in the imprecatory psalms: “let the teeth be broken in their mouths,” “drag them off like sheep to be butchered” (Jer. 12:3), and so on. Expressions of sadness and of joy are typically cast in such extreme forms in the Bible. It isn’t enough for the psalm writer to say that he was sad. Rather we have “My tears have been my food day and night.” [42:3] “My eye wastes away because of grief.” [6:7] There are virtually on every page of the Bible innumerable examples of this extravagant form of speech. In a similar way, David doesn’t simply have to deal with opposition from his enemies. He says that “...men trample upon me...my enemies trample upon me all day long.” [56:1-2]

Well, we have a lot of this in the passage we have read. It isn’t enough for the writer to say in v. 2 that laughter can be out of place in a world like ours. No, “it is *mad*” and “it is *useless*.” It is not only that work can be difficult; it caused him to “*hate* his toil” and to “give up his heart to despair.” It is not that he found himself disappointed with many things about life; no, “he *hated* his life.”

We need to be careful not to read this language without regard to Hebrew and Semitic style. Think, for example, of Jeremiah expressing his despair over the situation he found himself in as a prophet of judgment to an unwilling and spiritually disinterested people.

“Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him glad, saying, ‘A child is born to you – a son!’ May that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave...” [20:14-17]

Whew! That’s a bit much, we think. Jeremiah said he *hated* his life, but he certainly didn’t all the time. We know that. He knew of the Lord’s goodness to him and often speaks of it in his great book. Paul reminds us in his great 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans that the whole creation *groans* waiting for the day of the Lord. But, of course, for both unbelievers and for the people of God there is much happiness along the way, as Paul himself often says. In Revelation 6:10 – Revelation is a very Hebrew form of writing, every book in the Bible except Luke-Acts is written by a Jew with this Semitic background – we read of saints in heaven crying out to the Lord, “How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the world and avenge our blood?” It makes it sound as if they are still unhappy in heaven! You get the point. *We are not to press this language beyond its fair meaning.* It is typical Hebrew absoluteness or overstatement and when juxtaposed with much more positive statements we recognize that hatred and despair are hardly the whole picture. Indeed, even taken by themselves hatred and despair are descriptions that would be put in more qualified language if Ecclesiastes were being written in the modern West instead of the ancient near east.

But then we also have what is called parataxis, this setting side by side of different thoughts with no effort to harmonize them or relate the one to the other, another typical feature of Hebrew thinking and writing. So after all this despair we have the happy thoughts of vv. 24, where instead of hating our toil we are to find enjoyment in it, as we do in good food and drink, as we do in living wisely, in the knowledge of God, and the joy of salvation. Where is the connection between the two these two dramatically different outlooks on life in chapter 2? You won’t find it in Ecclesiastes. They are both true; that is all. So where does that leave us? Let me personalize chapter 2.

I have lived a very happy life. The Lord has, I fear, reflecting on the insight of Helen Roseveare I mentioned in last Sunday morning’s sermon – you remember her saying that the Lord entrusts great suffering to his most faithful disciples and to those he wishes to bless most greatly and to use most fruitfully – I say, I fear the Lord has not trusted me with as much as he might have if I

had greater faith in him and a greater love for him. I've have lived without great suffering and all in all a very pleasant and comfortable life.

I have enjoyed a wonderfully happy marriage that has been the source of great pleasure to me now for many years. I have greatly enjoyed being the father of my children. In a similar way, I have found deep satisfaction in my work as the pastor of this church – this congregation has through the years been very good to me, very generous, very kind – and I have found immense satisfaction in my work as a preacher of the Word of God. I have been given the opportunities and resources with which to study the Word at a deeper level, to study with gifted and learned men in other parts of the world, and to accumulate a sizeable library. These are privileges, I know very well, of which other ministers can only dream. It has been my privilege to see a great deal of the world and to enjoy its beautiful sights, sounds, and tastes. I have met wonderful people from virtually everywhere. I have enjoyed the friendship of many men and women who have greatly enriched my life. My life as a churchman has, in comparison to many others, been fulfilling and largely without acrimony or ill-will. I have lived in a country that has provided a very comfortable existence for me and my family. I've never experienced war first hand, never come anywhere near famine or pestilence. In thirty-four years of ministry here I have never missed a single Sunday service because of ill-health. The Lord gave me a healthy body. It was my inheritance to grow up in a godly and happy home and from the beginning of my life I have lived under the blessing of my heavenly Father, have known Christ as my savior, have always had in my heart the hope of everlasting life and have always known that my life had high purpose and great dignity because I am a child of God and a servant of the King of Kings. Truthfully I can say, I *must* say,

“The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.”  
[Ps. 16:6]

I certainly know the truth of 2:24-26, that more cheerful final paragraph, very well! I resonate with this wise man's more positive observations about life as we have them throughout his book.

But, let me tell you, there have been times without number in my life when I have been so ready to leave this world behind me and to escape from its frustrations, disappointments, its heartbreak, and its confusions that had an angel offered me an immediate exit I would have been sorely tempted to take it. *This life under the sun can be a bitch!* You know it and I know it.

Sometimes for me it has been the sadness of others, people here or people elsewhere; sadness that I have shared and that has weighed me down and made me feel that life was no pleasure at all. When my loved ones and especially my children are sad my life becomes very sad as well. Sometimes it has been some genuine injustice that has frustrated me, made me angry, and depressed me about life. I have also experienced the desolation of the death of loved ones and

friends: my brother-in-law at 42 years of age, my sister at 49, and my first and second grandchildren before they were born, who now lie in a tiny grave in a cemetery in Minneapolis.

It has been sometimes for me real bitterness to observe a world in which evil is called good, in which the most abject foolishness is called wisdom, and in which the devil seems to have his way in making life difficult especially for those who wish to live godly lives and serve the Lord. I have seen plenty of the debilitating effects of sin and the closer I am to those who lives are blighted by sin the uglier this world has often seemed to me. But, for me, most of all, it is my own moral and spiritual failure, my inexcusable incompetence as a Christian man, in all the various roles of my life, my great failures of omission and commission, disgustingly repeated through the years of my life. It is all the utterly stupid, immoral, ridiculous things I have said or done, the shame I felt in the aftermath – and no burden is heavier than shame – the innumerable ways in which I knew myself to have acted badly. I know all too well what it is to think one's toil a waste, one's laughter high irony given everything else that is true of my life and the life of others; I know very well what it is even to hate my life.

I have loved this life and I have hated it. I have enjoyed it and found it disgusting. I have wanted more of it and no more of it. That, brothers and sisters, is my testimony and I'm sure it is yours as well, especially those of you who are older. It is wisdom to understand this to be the nature of believing life; it is wisdom to face it, to anticipate it, and not to be undone by it: not to rejoice as if the misery were not at hand, and not to despair as if God's good things were not ours in abundance. *That is the great lesson of this book and it is a very important lesson to learn.* When it is not learned Christians either become bitter or dishonest with themselves and one another *or* they live inauthentic lives, as if life were only rosy or only miserable frustration. Life is both in this wonderful world that our Father made for us but which now lies under his curse. It must be and will be both. Accept it and take the one with the other as you must. Enjoy what can be enjoyed, and do not deny the heartbreak when it comes as it will. Jesus Christ was the man of sorrows acquainted with grief *and* yet he was accused of being a drunk and a glutton. So He obviously knew how to enjoy a good meal and a good glass of wine. We are to follow in his footsteps, you and I, in that way too!