

May 28

Ecclesiastes 1-3, 6, 8 & 9

Coming to you from the forbidden city here in the center of Beijing China. Super cool to be here. (Give some cool stats about the forbidden city.)

It is a very appropriate setting for the book of Ecclesiastes. The Book of Ecclesiastes has traditionally been attributed to Solomon because of the numerous verses in Chapter 1. Solomon - The king of Israel in all of its glory. The wealthiest king that ever ruled Israel. A man who was sought worldwide. A dude with 700 wives and 300 concubines in case the wives get boring.

The author identifies himself as a son of David, a king over Israel in Jerusalem, a teacher, one who is devoted to explore wisdom and all that is done under the sun; plus he is wiser than any who has ruled over Jerusalem before him. Many commentators, however, think that this was written later by a very wise person imagining himself in Solomon's position. Whether it was written by Solomon, or from his perspective, I will make my commentary as though he is the author.

So the opening lines are a total bummer. And the rest of the book is kind of the same. Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.

People come and go, there is birth and death, the wind blows in all directions.... and on and on it goes. It is meaningless. People search for meaning... and it is all meaningless. It doesn't matter if you are foolish or wise. You are going to die, rot and be forgotten. You are meaningless.

The teacher says, "I got involved in all kinds of building projects. The aesthetic and community value attracted me."

I can't help but think about this as I stand here in the forbidden city. Chinese emperors have ruled here for thousands of years. They dominated the landscape of Asia from these buildings. They accumulated massive amounts of wealth. They built beautiful buildings. They amassed monster armies. Everything that Solomon had the emperors of China had.

I wonder if they said the same thing as Solomon? "I accumulated all kinds of wealth. I thought that money might give me the experiences I sought. I even involved myself in many sexual exploits and gave myself fully to my work but none of this had any affect, none of this gave me meaning in my life."

There are some interesting recurring phrases in the chapters we read. Two of them are these: "This too is meaningless." "Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind." If the wisest man who ever lived could not make any sense out of life apart from God, do you think we might be able to do better? If the wisest people down through the years have come to the same conclusion over and over again, after leaving God out of the equation, there is no way back to meaning. Will we be

able to change the equation now? Not unless we start from a different place, not unless we start with the understanding that there really is a God who is there and who gives meaning and supplies purpose in the revelation He has given of Himself.

The pessimism of the man who tries to understand life without reference to God is seen in its boldest and most extreme form at the end of chapter 3. "Man's fate," the preacher says, "is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath, man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return." Wow! That of course is exactly the point of view that is engendered by the materialistic philosophy of the world that so many of our intellectuals and educators and scientists have today. If there is no God, if all there is is time plus matter plus chance – evolution -- then there really is no difference between man and beast, except that the mind and heart of man, because of its contemplative power, condemns him to live all of his life searching for meaning, when by definition there can be none.

That is where materialism leads, and the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes understood that many, many centuries ago.

It's funny how many people yearn for this environment. Wealth, pleasure, power. Whether it is Solomon, or an emperor of China... all is meaningless. Because it all eventually turns to dust.

In chapter 6, Solomon wrestles with the ultimate reality of death. Death is the final frustrator of meaning and purpose in the life of the man who does not have a living relationship with God. For, Solomon says, it really doesn't matter what you do or how you live, how much you accumulate or how much you accomplish, in the final analysis, to paraphrase Solomon, 'you can't take it with you.' You end up leaving all you have accumulated, in terms of reputation and goods and valuables, and power and honor... it all goes to someone else. Over and over again he comes back to this theme. It seems to have produced in him, as a man searching for the meaning of life without revelation, a great deal of bitterness and confusion.

You know, if the book of Ecclesiastes stopped here, it would be totally depressing. Just roll up in the fetal position and suck your thumb. But keep on reading, because there is good news coming.

This is Mark Ashton coming to you from Beijing China and the forbidden city. Keep on reading!