

Bible Challenge 2018

Week 25a: June 17-23

Outline

Ecclesiastes 1-2: Solomon's Pursuit of Wisdom
Ecclesiastes 3-5: A Reflection on the Sovereignty of God
Ecclesiastes 6:1-8:15: Life Application of Wisdom
Ecclesiastes 8-11: Practical Lessons
Ecclesiastes 12: The Conclusion to All Matters

Perhaps one of the most interesting and under-read books in the Old Testament is the book of Ecclesiastes. It is a book of wisdom, written by Solomon (though he calls himself Qoheleth — "The Preacher" throughout the book). Typically it is understood to be his writings late in life as he looks back on his accomplishments and on his failures (and there are lots of failures!) and then asks, what have I learned? If we can say one thing about Solomon's reflections, we can be reminded that while autobiography is normally in the sphere of the old man (he can no longer harm his reputation), it behooves the young man to learn from the wisdom of those who have gone before him. That is one of the great benefits of Ecclesiastes if we will learn from it.

Solomon's Pursuit of Wisdom

Solomon, due to his position, his wealth, and his discernment was in a position to see it all and to try it all. And so he did. Solomon shares about his desire to seek wisdom in the work that is done, then in acquiring wisdom for the sake of acquiring wisdom, then in seeking pleasure for its own sake, then accomplishments and buildings and servants. In the end, the phrase: "Vanity of vanity" comes back over and over again — it is like "striving after the wind" as some of our translations put it or like "vexation to the soul" as other translations put it.

Do note that while sometimes people walk away from these passages thinking that Solomon was a fatalist of sorts, that is not the case. When he is speaking of the vanity of things, his focus is on doing things for the sake of doing them. And if one is just working and seeking satisfaction in work or building and seeking satisfaction in the things you build, then you will find things to be vain and empty. Indeed, we must work and build for the glory of God and in that we will find meaning.

A Reflection on the Sovereignty of God

Ecclesiastes 3 begins with probably the best known words of this book (thanks to the Byrds). For everything there is a time and there is a season. Solomon is beginning to give us a peek at his thinking as he continues to reflect on the challenges before man, but in the midst, he reminds us that God is sovereign over the seasons and changes that take place in our lives. In the end, God determines the times and seasons in our lives and it is up to us to discover how we will glorify him in each.

The heart of this reflection is in 3:14 where Solomon writes: "whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it or taken from it." Solomon continues in this section and speaks about God's sovereignty in death and dying, our submission to God (in not neglecting the paying of our vows to God) and in how wealth tears down the wealthy unless their focus is first and foremost the Kingdom of God and not self.

Life Application of Wisdom & Practical Wisdom

Solomon next spends a good portion of his work focused on applying his wisdom to life, both in refuting bad ideas that people and in giving us tidbits of good practical advice. He begins by addressing the true nature of prosperity and not trusting in one's possessions, nor hoarding them. For they will fail you as they get spent and if you simply hoard them to amass as much as you can amass, someone will take them and enjoy them at your expense. He also reminds us that we don't often see the big picture of God's plan.

He speaks about how we must develop our character over our financial portfolio. He goes on, for example, in 7:16, to tell us not to be overly righteous or overly wise (lest self-pride set in), nor should we be overly wicked nor a fool. He speaks of submitting to the king's command because God has taken an oath toward him. The Apostle Paul addresses this in Romans 13 when he reminds us that the governor is a minister of God. He speaks of loving the wife of your youth and to live faithfully before God.

Finally, he instructs us to evangelize — casting our bread on the water — God will bring it back to you. Notice the emphasis on God bringing the bread back multifold.

Practical Lessons

Not that wisdom is not practical, but it seems that there is a transition from big ideas to more detailed practical reflections — how to live as the righteous and with honor in a world marked by sin and evil. Perhaps one of the most familiar and useful passages... that you should enjoy life with the wife of your youth. How often marriages get broken because this piece of wisdom is neglected in the lives of people.

This section also contains a wonderful word-picture of the damage that a little bit of foolishness can do. It is like that one fly that can ruin an entire vat of the perfumer's ointment. He further reminds those who are facing anger directed against them to stay calm and that your calmness often will put the anger of another to rest.

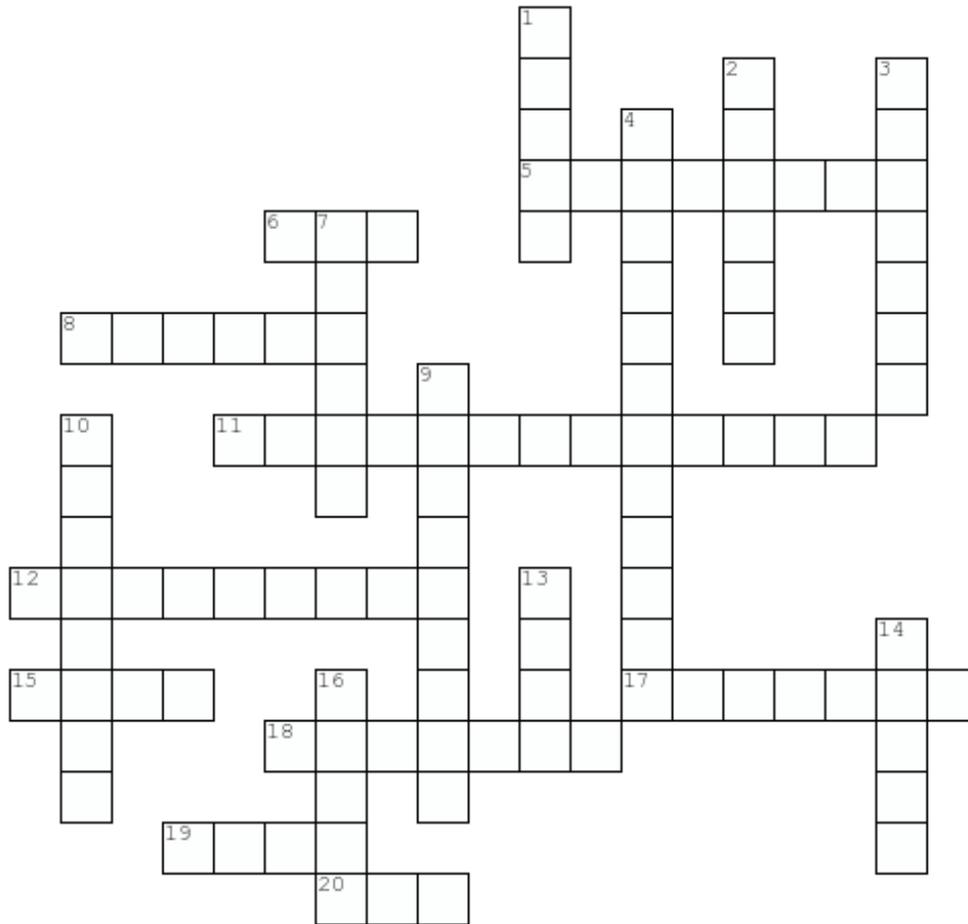
This section closes in chapter 11 which reminds you to labor and work (cast your bread on the waters) trusting that it will return. We may not see it return or be aware of its return, but return it will nevertheless. In the end, God brings all things (including us) into judgment; it is good if we are found having labored in the vineyard God set before us.

The Conclusion to All Matters

What gives meaning to life? How do I find purpose? Indeed this is a question that people from all walks of life tend to ask. Solomon's answer, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." If you wish to find that meaning in life, you must start here; if you look anywhere else, you will wander aimlessly.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, the document wherein Presbyterians find their theological sounding board, begins its Catechism with the question: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "To Glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Solomon, I think, would be very pleased with these words.

Week 25a: Ecclesiastes



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Across

5. This is better than precious ointment (2 words).
6. This is better than one.
8. The dust returns to the earth and this returns to God.
11. This is not easily broken (2 words).
12. These ruin a perfumer's ointment (2 words)
15. Though sinners seem to prosper, know that it will be well with those who ____ God.
17. This is the name that the author of Ecclesiastes gives to himself, meaning, 'The Preacher.'
18. 'I perceived that whatever God does lasts _____.'
19. Seeking pleasure in earthly things apart from heavenly satisfaction is like trying to shepherd the _____.
20. 'There is nothing new under the _____.'

Down

1. There is a time to weep and a time to _____.
2. To the author of this book, everything is _____.
3. 'Remember your _____ in the days of your youth.'
4. The whole duty of man is to fear God and keep his _____.
7. If you cast your bread here, you will find it after many days.
9. The author of this book was king in this city.
10. Meaning, 'The Preacher,' this is what the author of this book calls himself.
13. Enjoy life with the _____ of your youth.
14. Of making this there is no end.
16. The words of the wise are like this.