

HAVING IT ALL--HAVING NOTHING

By Steve Zeisler

A journalist commenting on the accelerated pace of modern life recently made this observation: Consider something as simple and commonplace as the telephone. Little more than a decade ago, most people had a single-line rotary dial in their home. Touch-tone telephones made it possible to dial faster. The innovation of call-waiting ensures that even if you were busy talking you could pick up the incoming caller. Call-forwarding ensures that if you left home or the office you could still be reached at your next destination. Answering machines guarantee that even if you are away you still would not miss anyone, particularly when a second generation of machines made it possible to call in from anywhere in the world and pick up messages simply by punching a touch-tone code. Cellular car phones eliminated one of the remaining places in which most people were absolutely unreachable. Telephones in airplanes eliminated perhaps the last place where it was impossible to be reached-unless you count camping in the wilderness, where the fully portable cellular phone has now solved that problem.

For better or worse, these advances and others like them press us to do more and do it faster; a way of life that we insist on and lament at the same time.

We find it difficult to examine the nature of lives lived too fast because we are surrounded by pressures and inducements to fast living that seem unchangeable. It is difficult to find a stable, quiet place that allows us to examine the accelerated life which is characteristic of Christian and non-Christian alike.

In Ecclesiastes, we have the remarkable record of someone (Qoheleth/Solomon) who, on his own, without persuasion or pushing by anyone else, decided to experiment with life in the fast lane. Compelled by nothing but his own interest, he set out to expand his horizons, to understand and experience everything that life had to offer. Here is how he puts it in the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes.

HAVING IT ALL

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

Solomon's quest, as it is recorded in this book, is devoid of heavenly revelation. This is what he means by the repeated use of the phrases "under the sun" and "under heaven"-life lived on earth apart from revealed truth. Solomon was the perfect subject to make this experiment. He had a godly heritage, and reigned as king over Israel in an era of peace and prosperity. He was extremely wise and fabulously rich. He lacked nothing, intellectually or materially, in his quest to find the meaning of life "under the sun." Who better to "go for the gusto" of life? Solomon thus set out to "seek and explore"-to seek in depth, to explore in breadth-all that life had to offer. Exploration was intended to bring information that would make life a joy to experience.

Preachers are notorious for alliteration, using words with the same first letter to help their listeners get a handle on the message. In the section which we will take this morning, 1:12 through 2:26, there are three words, all beginning with the letter 'p,' which will help us. Although the first one, profundity, is stretching things a little, I offer it anyway. Wisdom is what I really have in mind. The other two, pleasure, and posterity, will do fine. So we have profundity, pleasure, and posterity, the avenues down which Solomon sought for meaning. Profundity: What will our minds declare to us if we are wise enough to uncover everything about life? Pleasure: If we have opportunity to give ourselves over to all that life has to offer, what will we discover? Posterity: If we ourselves fail in our quest, what can we pass on to the next generation that will help them succeed?

Do these sound familiar? These are exactly the areas in which we expect our efforts to bring us success and happiness today. We need an advanced degree, we are told. We must do whatever we can to increase our knowledge so that we can get ahead. If that means buying the latest computer, going back to school, or taking special seminars, then that's the way to go. Then, pleasure. Indulge yourself, we are told. Change your toys for flashier and faster ones. And in our concern for posterity we try to raise smarter, well crafted children, thinking that this is the answer to the problems we face. These are the three arenas which Solomon set out to experience in his quest, only to discover the emptiness and futility of life lived "under the sun." "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher. "All is vanity" (1:2).

WISDOM AND GRIEF

So let us look at the Preacher's findings on profundity (wisdom). Verse 13:

And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

This man succeeded in everything he attempted. He decided to become more knowledgeable than anyone who had ever lived, and he did. He enquired, studied and read, and became supremely wise. No one has ever surpassed him in knowledge. The chastening thing about the experiment to which he gave himself was that although he succeeded in his quest, he was forced, upon reflection, to conclude that it only resulted in grief and pain.

Why is this? we wonder. Why should an increase in knowledge and understanding bring grief and pain? I think most of us suffer from a 'cockeyed optimist' syndrome. We feel that if we could just understand reality, that some semblance of coherence would emerge; that there is something beautiful awaiting us at the end of the 'yellow brick road'; that although to all outward appearances, the world seems topsy-turvy, at its core everything is good and rational. But no. If all we have to go on is life "under the sun," if heaven does not break through somewhere along the line, then the farther we penetrate in our search the more we will discover that there is no good center awaiting us at the end of our quest.

Both candidates for President have been criticized for portraying themselves in carefully selected 'sound bite' situations, packaged film clips designed to evoke a positive reaction from the voters. So we hear things like, "I'm tough on crime"; "I'm for good jobs and good wages." Of course, they do not say how they are going to accomplish these things. How tough exactly is "tough"? What exactly are the root causes of crime anyway? Given the selfishness of man, promises to fix economic woes are notoriously hard to keep. No one addresses these questions. But Solomon did. And he discovered that there are no pat answers at the end, only more questions.

A friend once told me his experience of being lost alone in a forest. He felt that he was heading toward a road, but eventually came to realize that there was no road, just more trees. As darkness descended, the first twinges of panic hit him as he began to wonder if he would ever get out of the forest. Maybe it would just go on forever. This is what Solomon found in his quest for wisdom. He saw things for what they really were. Modern technology creates new jobs and new opportunities, but the ozone layer suffers. Effectiveness in limiting the availability of drugs makes prices and profits go up so that pushers become bolder and more successful. Prisons breed crime instead of curtailing it. Human sexuality is more widely understood and more painfully experienced than ever.

BENT AND MISSING

Solomon was forced to conclude that "in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increased pain." Here is how he describes what he learned, "What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted." Like a jigsaw puzzle that is lacking several pieces to complete the picture, "what is lacking cannot be counted." There is no way to complete the task. "What is crooked cannot be straightened." I have counseled people who make the same mistakes over and over again, hurting themselves and others in the process. In my efforts to discover the root cause of their behavior, I sometimes hear something along the lines of "I'm trying to gain the approval of my father." The fact that in some cases the father has been dead for years-and can not undo hurt-doesn't seem to matter. They continue seeking, and warped lives and stunted spiritual growth are the result.

"What is crooked cannot be straightened." If we are going to be wise, we must be honest; and if are honest, we will discover that life lived "under the sun" is, at best, a mixed bag of truth and error. Solomon set out to discover the fount of wisdom, but found himself racing with the wind. Grief and pain were his only rewards.

PLEASURE

Next, he set about investigating pleasure. Let us see what he discovered. Chapter 2:1-11:
I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. I enlarged my works; I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves. And I possesses flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men-many concubines.

Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

One observer set out to pursue pleasure, and again he was successful. He did not refuse anything that his eyes desired; he did not withhold his heart from any pleasure. Notice that he does not moralize about his activities. He found some enjoyment in what he did. "My heart was pleased," he says in verse 10. But the problem is, pleasure doesn't get you anywhere. You are hoping for life, but your striving does not pay off. Laughter without joy is madness, says the Preacher. And of pleasure, he says, "What does it accomplish?" (v.2).

Halloween, one of the more indulgent days of the year in our culture, is a good example of the point being made here. We carve grinning faces on pumpkins, but they are hollow and they soon rot. If you carve them too early, you will have a rotting, ugly heap of yellow mush on your hands. The laughter of Halloween is mad, not life-giving. The candy which is lavished about does not build up or strengthen. It tastes good for the moment but afterwards a sickening feeling comes. Self-indulgence does not lead to freedom or fulfillment. This too was Solomon's experience.

And he was very thorough in his search for pleasure. He began with bodily stimulation, using wine as his first experiment. But he was careful to retain enough of his mental capacities so as to enjoy his tasting. He became a connoisseur of wine, not a Thunderbird-imbibing drunk. He indulged himself sexually, with many concubines, he tells us, leaving to our imaginations the kinds of things he experienced in his quest. Then he went beyond bodily pleasures and set about building houses, parks, gardens and irrigation pools. As king, Solomon controlled vast properties. The books of Kings and Chronicles detail his wealth and how he indulged his fancies.

EMPTY INDULGENCE

Here we must recognize that the categories he speaks of, slaves, pools of water, forests, etc., were appropriate to the day in which he lived. And he applied himself to both natural and man-made pleasures. Planting a forest in Judea and keeping it green and lush boggles the mind, but this is what he did. What an extraordinary accomplishment! Slaves, both home-grown and captives from far-flung lands, flocks and herds, silver and gold—all of these things he indulged in with no expense spared. If today people spend their money on expensive cars and world tours, Solomon surpassed all of this in his extravagant search for pleasure.

He indulged in nature and in the beauty of creation, in ornate buildings and city planning. And he was incredibly refined in his indulgence. Balance, color and fragrance to delight the senses were his goals. He imported the finest singers and musicians to entertain himself and his court. He was a connoisseur of taste and sound, and he placed no bounds on his indulgence in anything which would serve to stimulate either his body or his mind. But all to no avail: "behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun," he concludes (verse 10).

Someone found the Super Bowl ring of a San Francisco '49er football player in a pawnshop, its owner having apparently fallen on hard times. What a fall from grace! From the adulation lavished on a Super Bowl winner, epitomized by a diamond-studded winners' ring, to a pawn shop. Fame and adulation do not last. One championship season is quickly followed by another. So what if Oakland swept the Red Sox; they couldn't beat the Dodgers. Success in this life can be a fleeting thing. You may end up selling your symbols of success just to pay the rent. These things don't last.

This brings us to posterity, the third point of the Preacher's discourse. Note that the phrases, "more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem" (1:16 regarding wisdom), and, "more than all who were in Jerusalem before me" (2:7 regarding pleasure), appear in the first two chapters. It seems Solomon is measuring himself with his predecessors in Jerusalem in terms of wisdom and indulgence. He changes his perspective then and looks, not at the past, but at the future—hoping he can create success for kings who will follow him.

POSTERITY

Verse 12:

So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done? And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light exceeds darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me, because everything is futility and striving after wind.

Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I labored under the sun. When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to the one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.

As he thinks of those who will follow him, the Preacher, aware that "wisdom excels folly as light exceeds darkness," knows that there is no guarantee his successor will be any the wiser for all that he himself has discovered in his quest. Further, he has seen that, despite the truth of what he has uncovered, he has at times observed that fools get along quite well in life, while many wise people seem destined to fail. Thus it is by no means certain that all that he has accomplished—wisdom, treasure and architectural marvels—will last even one generation after him. He cannot ensure that his successors will appreciate any of his accomplishments and will want to perpetuate them.

NO GUARANTEES

When I first began driving a car, my father gave me a lecture on the need for careful driving. He convinced me, and I was a careful driver. But one day, following the first rainstorm of the winter, my car skidded on the slick road and I side-swiped another car, despite my careful driving. I remember thinking to myself how unfair this seemed. Several of my friends were reckless speed hogs, yet they never got in any accidents or got speeding tickets. But here I was, doing everything my father told me, and I still became involved in an accident. Foolish people often are not called to account for their foolishness, and posterity offers no better hope for success in life than either wisdom or pleasure.

The final verses speak of Solomon's despair. Verse 22:

For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

His discoveries in the area of wisdom and knowledge only served to make him aware of the wickedness of the human experience. No matter how far he hiked through the woods, he failed to find his way out. "What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted." He tried pleasure, but he ended up with a rotting pumpkin carved with a stupid, hollow grin. "Everything is futility and striving after wind." So he turned his attention to his posterity, the next generation, only to discover that there was no guarantee that they would listen to or inherit his wisdom. He must conclude that he has failed. And yet cannot stop asking questions, despite the profoundly unsatisfying answers he is getting.

HOPE

In the concluding verses, however, Solomon is suddenly confronted with a different perspective. Verse 24:

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that He may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

The greatest challenge to a life lived without revelation from God is to encounter a person whose life is filled with His presence and approval. It was true for Solomon, the ancient man with the modern lifestyle, and it is true today. Despair is most often challenged by encountering a man or woman who, in New Testament terms, "manifests the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him" (2 Cor.2:14). Solomon had acquired vast wisdom and knowledge. What he had not found was "wisdom and knowledge and joy" (2:26).

I had a bad case of asthma when I was a boy. We lived in the Midwest then, and behind our house was a field filled with rag weed, something I was very allergic to. Other members of my family also had asthma, so I grew up thinking that living indoors and feeling bad during rag weed season was part of life. But somewhere along the way I discovered that not everyone suffered as I did. My friends could run through fields of the stuff and never complain. Learning that pollen had no effect on others was quite revealing to me. They could live life on utterly different terms than I was accustomed to.

This is what Solomon discovered. The first ray of light had broken through to him. Jesus said that believers are to be like "a city set on a hill." Those who know him are the light of the world. Do those who are living life "under the sun" see joy and light when they encounter us, so that their own despair about life is called into question? Do they feel that there is an answer to their deepest needs? Do they feel that they, too, would be welcomed to that city on the hill? This is the believer's assignment in life.

In Psalm 30, David describes the change that was wrought in his life by the transcendent God who broke

through his despair to reach him:

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness;
That my soul may sing praise to Thee, and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to Thee forever.

May our thanks be genuine and our song a source of hope to others.

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