

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23

²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ³What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? ¹²I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. ¹⁷So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. ¹⁸I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who know whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

I thank God for the book of Ecclesiastes. I am very glad to know that even faithful Jews in ancient times asked, "What is the point? Why should I work so desperately, diligently hard at life, only to die?!" I am grateful that this fundamental question of existence is not seen as lacking in faith (as such questions are usually viewed in Christianity) but holy, necessary, and sanctified enough to make it into the Holy Bible.

This book is called, "Koheleth" in Hebrew and "Ecclesiastes" in Greek, both of which mean "the one who assembled". Perhaps your time as a Christian as brought you into contact with the words, "ecclesiastical" or "ecclesial". Both of these words are from the same Greek root as Ecclesiastes, "ecclē" which means "to assemble" and "to gather" as in "the people gather to hear Jesus teach."

While we tend to translate the first word of this book "vanity", English speaking Jews translate "hevel" as "futility." I find this helpful since I grew up associating vanity with "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" For Koheleth, "futility" is the inability of humans to make sense of the world in which we live. Humans "Futility" is the illusion of control over one's own life, only to have record flooding or fire take everything away.

Psalm 49:1-12

¹Hear this, all you peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

²both low and high, rich and poor together.

³My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.

⁴I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.

⁵Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,

⁶those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?

⁷Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it.

⁸For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice

⁹that one should live on forever and never see the grave.

¹⁰When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others.

¹¹Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they named lands their own.

¹²Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish.

This is a very unusual psalm in that it is addressed to the audience only and never to God directly. The "ransom" theme suggests that there was practice in some death penalty cases that a ransom could be posted for the condemned. The psalmist concludes that no one is ransomed from death and therefore death makes all equal.

Colossians 3:1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

⁸But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

In the previous chapter, the author admonishes the congregation in Colossae Jewish and pagan dietary laws and regulations, and live in baptized life of Christ alone. The first sentence of the above pericope reminds the congregation, and all readers, that we all have been raised from death of sinful self to life in Christ. Therefore, our lives should reflect that new life, lacking impurity, evil desires, etc.

Verse 11 may well describe the various peoples in the congregation. Jews and non-Jews. Barbarian refers to those under Roman rule who are not Roman. Scythians are a conquered people under Roman rule. Slaves would be not only "slaves for life" but also indentured servants. In all of these disparate people, Christ happily dwells, uniting them into His own body.

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

This parable begins with a common Lukan device, a question from the crowd affords Jesus the chance to teach through parable. This particular question comes from a layperson, not a scribe, Sadducee, or Pharisee. This man wants help dividing up Dad’s estate. I have read that the firstborn son was to inherit 1/3 of the estate, the rest being divided among the younger sons. I have also read that the firstborn son got 2x as much as the remaining brothers. I would imagine familial traditions such as these changed over time and in different areas. Regardless, this man wants Jesus to act as Moses and Elijah and Elisha and Samuel did, serving as arbiter in familial disputes. But Jesus rejects the man’s request outright and then tosses out the whole topic of inheritance squabbles. Why?

The ancient Israelites believed that there was just so much wealth in the world and that if you had a whole bunch, then there were a lot of people who were missing some of theirs because you had it. Therefore, if you had a bumper crop or a year way into the black, it was incumbent on you to share your good fortune. As Jesus tells this parable, he does not say this rich fool acted like Joseph and Pharaoh, saving up the extras to feed everyone in lean years sure to follow. No, this rich fool simply hoards his wealth. No sharing. No storing away prudently to share in tough times ahead. Just hoarding.

The parable is quite poetic in Greek. The rich fool addresses himself saying, “Soul...” and omits God from the decisions regarding his abundant wealth. When God does come into the picture, it is because God addresses the man, announcing, “Your soul will be taken from you.” The last word the man says to himself is an admonishment to “be merry,” which in Greek is “euphrano,” slap happy, giddy. When God addresses the man, God calls him “fool” which in Greek is “aphron” which is too silly and giddy to practice sound judgment.

The man who petitioned Jesus is in a family who is grieving the death of their patriarch. Instead of uniting to mourn, they are splitting over money. Instead of focusing on family, gratitude, and each other, they are focusing on the estate. Jesus tells this parable to counter that divide. Treasure in heaven is made of relationships, faith, love, service, grace, mercy, not divided inheritance.