

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

An Examination of All that Happens under Heaven

A. The Author of this Investigation

The author has been introduced in the first outline.

The expression "the words of" which is also found in Jeremiah 1:1 and Amos 1:1 as a heading above prophetic speech, indicates that we do not have loose proverbs in Ecclesiastes, but a connected presentation and explanation.

The Teacher is called the son of David and king in Jerusalem in this passage. It is often thought that Solomon is meant here. The Teacher does, indeed, present himself as Solomon and suggests that Solomon is the speaker (see Outline 1). The main point is, however, that he calls himself the son of David. Therefore, one ought to pay special attention to the promises God made to David and his house. (See 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89; Isaiah 55:3). The question of Psalm 89:49 is the same question of The Teacher and of God's Old Testament advent-congregation.

Similarly, God has made glorious promises to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-4; Zechariah 12:6; etc.), as well as to Israel (Genesis 28:10-15; Deuteronomy 7:6; Jeremiah 31:6). But how different reality is!

The use of the past tense in verse 12 ("I ... was king") indicates that the Davidic kingship is past. David and Solomon are at the end of their journeys here. They review those journeys, and speak their final word. This is the end now. Through their word, the Shepherd of Israel speaks (12:11), and his Word gathers the Church.

B. The Progress of this Investigation

Verses 2-11 are an introduction to the entire book, but they also contain the conclusion to which The Teacher comes in the end. This is also what we have in 2:1. Everything is extreme vanity, completely meaningless and aimless, IF God does not break this cycle under the sun, IF, in our history, he is not working towards our redemption. The Teacher does not think only of human actions in this (vv. 3,4), but of everything which happens under the sun. He hears the sighing of nature, of history and of all creation.

Note, however, that this "vanity" (uselessness), according to The Teacher himself, can only be maintained if one speaks from experience (the things which men see, cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). For if one speaks from experience, he is confronted with the power of sin, with death, with decay everywhere. The Teacher, however, evidently knows differently and has much more to say than this. For he will confess that also in the apparent cycles of nature and history, God proceeds along a straight path to the messianic age, the renewal of all things. The problem, however, is that one cannot see very much of this as yet.

For Israel has not only lost its national independence, but its spiritual nature is also hard to discern - even though Israel's name is "the communion of saints". This oppressed nation is weak, spiritually as well as morally. One who sees this and only this, can come to but one conclusion: all is meaningless. The Teacher, however, does not refer to human toil here, as if it alone were vain and useless. He is not that general in his writing.

The point is not the meaning of "history" in general, but the meaning of Israel's history and of the dominion of the Davidic king, which is the pivot on which all history turns. If it does not turn well with Jerusalem, Zion, the temple and Israel, then nothing good is to be expected for the whole world. In Jerusalem it is now night. This is the great problem with which The Teacher and his addressees must wrestle. Verse 3 speaks about a "man", but this does not mean that this is man in general, for the complaint mentioned here resounds in the church also. The Israelite speaks here from his own situation: Israel is an enslaved church under the cross, tired (the theme is weariness in the book) and tempted. From this situation The Teacher sees the one (church) generation go and the next generation come. In this very place, Jerusalem, he sees the sun rise and set, he hears the wind blow, day in day out, and this all makes him unbelievably tired. These are all signs for him and prove to him that the new which is promised (deliverance from the foreign yoke, the day of the Messiah, the renewing of all things) has not yet come. Is there anything about which man can say: this is new?

When the church people, therefore, must acknowledge that all is meaningless (IF nothing else comes), then indeed the efforts of all people have become hopeless.

The prophecy proclaimed that the very rising and setting of the sun would be the guarantee that the Lord would never break the covenant with David (Jeremiah 33:19ff). But who still understood this? Slowly but surely, Israel was threatening to lose its bonds with prophecy.

Verses 13-17 relate how The Teacher attempted by means of wisdom to fathom all that is done under heaven. The wisdom meant here is the wisdom which comes from God, which is imparted to us in the revelation of his Word, and which becomes our personal possession through the fear of the LORD. Armed with this wisdom, The Teacher examines all things done under the sun (and the place of the church in all this), only to stumble immediately over that which is twisted (i.e. the wrongs, sin, which cannot be straightened). The Teacher has gathered an abundance of wisdom, but in the process he discovered much silliness and nonsense. And now he is faced with that which is beyond repair.

This is a confession of human incapacity. Wisdom and folly, knowledge and nonsense, clash time and again, not only in the world, but also in the church, and folly wins everywhere. The Teacher discovers that this is so in the present, and was so in the past, which he has included in his investigation. When he studies church history, then he also finds folly and silliness there. (Think of Saul, the sins of David and Solomon, the division of the kingdom, Ahaz and Manasseh, the captivity, a small restoration, but then

immediately a deformation as is apparent from the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi.)

C. Tentative Result of this Investigation

“All ... [is] meaningless and a chasing after the wind” The Teacher concludes (vv. 14,17). This applies to everything which happens, even the investigation of it. The more wisdom one gathers, the more grievous his discoveries are: folly reigns everywhere.

Note: The contrast between wise men and fools is the same as between the righteous (pious) man and the ungodly. In this vicious cycle of history, vanity rules. The Teacher goes along on the merry-go-round, whether he wants to or not. Life will not be redeemed.

At least, that is what we learn from experience.

Questions

1. What does the expression "under the sun" or "under heaven" mean? Remember that The Teacher had to perform his historical investigation of all things in this world as it had become through sin (cf. Genesis 3 and 4).
2. One often speaks of nature and history as a "vicious circle", that is, a circle in which one constantly goes around without getting any further. Do you believe that nature and history are indeed involved in such a vicious circle? Do you imagine history to be represented by a circle or a line?
3. Does it make much difference whether one speaks from revelation or from experience?
4. What does the expression in Romans 8:20, "the creation was subjected to frustration" mean? Is that something like the vicious circle, about which question 2 speaks?
5. In Ecclesiastes 1:13, The Teacher says "What a heavy burden God has laid on man!" What is your opinion about that expression? Is it still a divine mandate to investigate everything which happens under heaven? Does it make much difference whether a believer or an unbeliever teaches history? Are facts not facts?

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