

1

Ecclesiastes 1:3 and 9 *We live under the sun*

Text: Ecclesiastes 1 : 3, 9.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11; Revelation 1: 22-27.

Singing:

Psalm 103: 1, 8.

Psalm 103: 4.

Psalm 72: 1, 3, 10.

Psalm 121: 3, 4.

Hymn 40: 1, 4, 5

Theme and points:

The LORD reminds us that we live here under the sun. This revelation:

- 1) exposes our futility*
- 2) exalts God's sovereignty*
- 3) expresses our expectancy*

Ecclesiastes 1:3 and 9

We live under the sun

What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Over the years, I have made the book of Ecclesiastes the object of my personal meditations. It is such a fascinating book, although that holds true for all books in the Bible. What is special about the book of Ecclesiastes is that it captures and comments on some of the basic issues of life as we experience them. Hence we want to take a closer look at some key passages in this book. To have an exhaustive series on this book would perhaps be too much and beyond our capabilities, but certainly some of the main passages may be explained.

Let me by way of introduction first make some general remarks. The book of Ecclesiastes has been considered by many Bible scholars to be the last book written in the Old Testament time, about 300 years before our Lord was born, and if that is true, this book kind of wraps up the Old Testament revelation of God.

All is meaningless?

It may not sound like a very uplifting ending, since the main theme seems to be that all is meaningless (1:2), but we understand that the book requires and receives a continuation. The questions posed in Ecclesiastes are answered in the New Testament, in the Gospel. When we come to Ecclesiastes, we are only halfway in the Scriptures, and there is much more to come.

As a matter of fact, we should see this book as the Lord's assessment and revelation of the great fall and final failure of his people. Everything is subjected to futility or frustration, as Paul later writes to the Romans (Rom 8: 20), and we learn that we need something to bring us out of the impasse, the never-ending circle of hopelessness. There is a great vacuum that needs to be filled. There is a vacancy on the throne of David that demands the birth of a Son. Therefore this book is purely *messianic* from start to finish... Let us never overlook this important aspect.

Under the sun

We see this aspect also in the expression on which I want to focus at present. In both passages, chosen as text, we find the expression, "...under the sun." Please underline that expression. I may mention that this expression is found almost 30 times in this book; from beginning to end it returns time and again. Yet many explainers do not focus on the relevance of this expression for the explanation of the whole book. Therefore I ask your attention for it in this sermon.

We live under the sun. There is a parallel expression, "under heaven", and it means the same thing: we live under heaven or under the sun, that is, on this earth. Here is where we are born, live, function for a time, and also die. Our entire perspective while we are here is determined by the possibilities and limitations that we have as creatures under the sun. I think that this expression gives us an important key to the entire book of Ecclesiastes. I summarize this as follows:

The LORD reminds us that we live here under the sun. This revelation:

- 1) exposes our futility*
- 2) exalts God's sovereignty*
- 3) expresses our expectancy.*

The text says, "What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils *under the sun*?" And also, "...there is nothing new *under the sun*". These texts imply that there is little, if at all, to be gained and that nothing really changes (for the better) on this earth. We are kind of stuck in a rut, nothing is lasting, and everything eventually fails. There is definitely no lasting positive change, and we are caught up in a vicious circle.

The greater light

But that is not the aspect I want to explore as yet. Let us first consider the position of the sun in the human drama. The sun is called in Genesis 1 "the greater light." It is the celestial body that not only gives light, but also ensures life. Without the sun, life on this earth would be impossible. Even the other great "light", the moon, takes its light from the sun and reflects it upon the earth. The only other lights that appear to have a source of their own are the stars, but we will leave them out of the picture since their immediate influence on the earth is negligible.

The sun is a body which is necessary for the proper development and continuation of life on the earth. I mention, as an aside, that the sun alone cannot do this. There must also be rain and clouds, wind and cold, and all

atmospheric conditions must come together to ensure life, but in all this the sun plays an integral role.

It is therefore a direct judgment of God when the sun is darkened, especially at midday. Perhaps there is no sign in the heavens more frightening than this. The great and last judgment is also connected to the darkening of the sun. Think of the prophecy of Joel about the day of the LORD: “The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon to blood...” (Joel 2: 31) When the sun no longer shines, the *end* has come.

Symbolic of duration

Now until that day, we have the assurance of God that the sun will continue to shine. Even when it rains, the sun will break through the clouds, and a rainbow will appear in the sky as a reminder of the fact that the sun will shine and the rain will stop (Gen 9: 12-16). The sun is therefore also symbolic in Scripture of *duration*. A lot of disasters may strike, general or even personal ones, but the sun will rise each morning and set each evening, as long as this earth exists.

In Psalm 19, there is an interesting passage about the sun. The sun is not an object that gives life. It is a created entity and therefore it may never be worshipped, as heathen nations did. God controls the sun as part of his creation.

In Psalm 19: 4 (end) and 5 we read, “In the heavens [God] has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.” The sun may be spectacular in its rising and glorious in its setting, but it is always under the almighty power of God. “He has pitched a tent for it”, that is, He controls its going and coming.

By the providence of God, the sun will rise every day. It will do so as long as this creation lasts and functions. Hence in Psalm 72:5 we can read that the great King (the Son of David, the Messiah) will endure as long as the sun (Ps 72:17). There we also find the petition: “May his name endure forever, may it continue as long as the sun” (Ps 72:17). We know from elsewhere (the book of Revelation) that the great Son, our Lord, will outlast the sun, but this expression in Psalm 72 means to say that as long as this earth is here and the sun shines, Jesus Christ is King. He will endure like the sun.

Never above the sun

It is under this sun that we all live, no matter where we dwell on this earth. The expression “under the sun” shows us our particular place in the big scheme of events. We are never *above* the sun. Man has been able to go to the moon and is trying to get beyond even that, but we have not gone beyond the sun. We cannot land on the sun, either, for we would be incinerated long before we came close. The expression “under the sun” therefore denotes a clear limitation for us. We always live under the sun, never above or beyond it.

The expression “under the sun” in the book of Ecclesiastes has come to indicate our *futility*. Like all creatures, we live under the sun, and this means that we are subject to all the conditions that prevail under the sun. In terms of *time*, it means that we all have our day under the sun, but it is soon gone. The sun continues its path over this earth, but we do not, for we return to dust and ashes. One day I will not rise, but the sun will rise, regardless of my death.

Futility also means that we cannot really progress. The situation of people is basically the same, always and everywhere. I know that through science and the God-given ability to find God’s gifts in creation, we may speak of progress (for example in the treatment of certain cancers or other illnesses) but the basic situation does not change and the character of man does not improve. Life’s conditions may vary from time to time and from place to place, but the overall profile of human life does not. We are all born, live for a longer or shorter period of time, amass riches or stay poor, and life may be varied and multi-faceted, but it always follows the same pattern of rising, shining, and falling.

Nothing really changes

In fact, this is one of the themes of the whole book: nothing really changes. The more things (seem to) change, the more they stay the same. Verse 9 makes this very clear: “there is *nothing new* under the sun”. Life can be very interesting and exciting (and we never stop searching and seeking for new things and experiences), but there is nothing new under the sun. Do you see that word “nothing”?

The next verse tells us that we sometimes *think* there is something new. We may present something as new, saying, “Look, this is something new!” But it isn’t, really. People just think so, and they do not even remember that what they think is new is actually as old as the hills. Under the sun, from where we stand and live, from our vantage point, there is nothing

new to be found or expected. It is the same old story all the time. Different words, same story, and it is all so futile.

We are not really getting anywhere. There is no major breakthrough. I am not talking here about scientific knowledge, like technological or medical advances, but I mean the overall picture. The flow of life, the character of man, of us all, remains the same in every generation. Generally the situation tends to get worse. We are not moving forward, but in fact regressing, and even standing still means that we fall back.

In that context, it is concluded that everything is vanity, or as the NIV has it, meaningless. We who live under the sun are subject to this futility, this inability to break out, to climb up, and to progress. No matter what you do or try, in the end it means nothing, achieves nothing, and gains nothing. All things are wearisome; life just makes you terribly tired.

Look up and away

Why is it important that we are reminded of this as God's people? The answer is: because we tend to blow up our own importance and achievements. Many people know that life is futile, but they will not acknowledge or seek the great Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. They deny their place under the sun, seek to hide their futility, and pretend to stand above life and its hardships. This futility is not something which anyone would readily acknowledge of himself. It needs to be exposed, demonstrated, and brought home to us. We have to learn to look up and away from this life under the sun.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books in the Bible. These books are meant to give us a solid grip on how to live life as a child of God. The first item of great importance is then this: the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (cf. Proverbs 1: 16). You may not leave the LORD out of the picture, but you must see him where He is and belongs: above the sun. This is the bottom line in all the wisdom books in the Bible.

For we know that God is in the highest heavens, and that He governs all things. He is *above* the sun. I think of Psalm 103: 19, where we read, "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all." Being under the sun, we must before all things acknowledge the *sovereignty* of God.

The sovereignty of God

What is sovereignty? It means to be above all others, to be responsible only to oneself. Sometimes earthly kings or queens are called "sovereign",

but that is really a misnomer, for all created powers are subject and accountable to God. God alone, as the Creator of all things, stands above all things and everything answers to him. Imagine if a creature from under the sun would question the one who created the sun and is enthroned above it?

It was asked of Job (as recorded in another wisdom book) who he was to answer back to God. "Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place? What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside?" (Job 38: 11, 19) Can we direct the sun to rise and to set? Who are we in the grand scheme of things?

It is not so hard *theoretically* to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. Nothing is hard in theory. But what about doing so in practice? Will we do it in the midst of the throes of life, when the going really gets tough? Job said, "I put my hand over my mouth. I had better be quiet. Say nothing to the sovereign and almighty God" (cf. Job 40:4). We can question God in so many ways. How can He do this or that? Why does He allow certain things? What's the sense? I don't really need this. My life was going on along just fine when this or that happened... But do not speak back to God or call him to account.

God's sovereignty needs to be *exalted*, not just acknowledged, but exalted and praised. It should not be a matter of resignation, even bitter resignation: oh well, God is in heaven, I am on earth, what can I do or say.....? We'll just have to accept things the way they are. And in the meantime we don't. We can be so angry sometimes with the LORD. Not that anyone would ever see it, but deep down we are angry, hurt, saddened, or whatever. In the least we develop some cynicism about the providence of God. Does He really know what He is doing? The world is full of cynics, among them also cynical covenant children, who can not manage their own affairs but surely like to tell God how to run things.

Where shall I look?

There is only one way to go that is pleasing to the LORD. These wisdom books, and the book of Ecclesiastes, have one purpose: to focus our attention *above* the sun. This revelation of God determines our expectancy: where shall I look, from where comes my help? (cf. Psalm 121). Living under the sun we must develop an eye for what is happening from beyond the sun.

We cannot see beyond the sun with our eyes unless they are the eyes of *faith*. This essential wisdom is gained only from the revelation, the Word

of God. We learn this by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a wisdom imparted and praised in the Psalms. I mentioned Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills -where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth”. And then it says, “The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night”. These celestial bodies, sun and moon, are not powers on their own, to be idolized and worshipped as the heathen do, but they are under God’s direction and serve his purpose.

All that happens under the sun is not isolated or fragmented, but is determined from above the sun, where the Maker of heaven and earth resides, who is also my God and my Father.

The book of Ecclesiastes -as do the other wisdom books- directs us to the great work of God. We are taught to expect all things from God alone in Christ Jesus. In him who arose from the dead all vanity is removed. He gives eternal meaning to our lives.

The sun will be no more

In the book of Revelation we read that one day the sun will be no more. Let us close with Revelation 21: 23, “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp”. See that? Now I live under the sun, with all the attendant perils of a life under the sun, but even under the sun we still walk in the light of the LORD. And the sun will not last. We will outlast the sun. We will live forever in the glory of the Father, before the face of the Son and in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

That is the direction to which we must look. That is what we may call “the big picture.” There will be no night there. It will be a place of perfect splendor and eternal joy. The sun will never set, the moon will never rise, for we shall always walk in the light of the LORD. The night of weeping has become the morn of song.

For this to happen, our Lord Jesus Christ had to hang in the darkness of Golgotha, when the sun’s light failed at midday. Our glory does not come easy, but at great price. But He could say, “It is finished”. Then the light began to filter again through the darkness of Golgotha.

I know where to look

Now I know where to look for help. I know where to find hope. I have a clear direction and a strong focus. I have great expectancy in this life. Looking beyond the sun, I know that even life under the sun becomes beautiful and wondrous. The Preacher knows about that, too, and we will focus on that in the following section.

It is true that we still live under the sun and must deal with all that comes our way in this life. It is not always easy and sometimes it is downright difficult. Time and again our futility and weaknesses are exposed and our resolve is tested, lest we should trust in ourselves or things from under the sun.

We who live under the sun may in Christ look beyond it and see a new world dawning where the eternal meaning of life will be brilliantly seen and celebrated forever. Ecclesiastes: we are only half-way there. Revelation: we arrive, finally.

AMEN.