

Chasing the Wind: Knowledge

DAVE BAST

Qoheleth, the Preacher, is the title chosen for himself by the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Traditionally, he is thought to have been King Solomon, who shares more of his proverbial wisdom in this rather dark book. The Preacher's characteristic refrain is: Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, and a chasing after the wind. It is a critique of so much of what passes for real life in this world under the sun; but if we pay attention to what the Preacher says, we will catch a hint of true wisdom and be pointed toward a more meaningful way to live.

DUANE KELDERMAN

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Duane, we are looking at the book of Ecclesiastes, and its wisdom for our lives; and today we are going to go back to Chapter 1. In our last program, we focused in on perhaps a more famous chapter, Chapter 3; but Chapter 1 launches that characteristic refrain where the Preacher talks about the emptiness of so much of life. So it starts:

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. ³What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ⁴A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. ⁶The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north, around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. ⁸All things are full of weariness. The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Pretty bleak stuff.

DUANE KELDERMAN

It is. It is. As I listened to you read that just now, it strikes me again how circular life is. We like to think that it is linear. We keep building this and building this, and then we build... He says: Nah, nah. We sort of go in circles.

DAVE BAST

You are right. One of the cherished ideas of modern people is the idea of progress; that things are always getting better and better and the new generation will be richer than the older generation, and children will live better than their parents did, and on and on we go into this infinite future, climbing ever upward and onward; and Qoheleth says: Forget about it!

DUANE KELDERMAN

I remember as a little child growing up in a home where my parents did not – we did not have flowers – they did not spend any time planting flowers; and I remember thinking: Well, yes. Why would you plant flowers? They die right away in the fall. Why would you spend all that time getting your yard looking so nice, and then in the fall it is all gone? You have to keep working for things that do not leave in the fall.

The message of the book of Ecclesiastes is: Duane, that is really all there is. You have an illusion that what you are building is going forever and ever, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger, and life is somehow cumulative; but no; what life is is enjoying the flowers, enjoying the seasons of life.

DAVE BAST

He uses these images: The wind blows from the south, and then it blows from the north. The streams run into the sea, but the sea is never filled. It is just a cycle that goes on and on; and the point of what he seems to be saying is nothing matters in the long run because nothing lasts. That is a truth that many perceptive people have seen, and it has led to kind of a bleak despair, if that is all you see about life.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; if that is all you see, right. I think that his comment, “There is nothing new under the sun,” I think that also fits with people who have lived a lot of life. I think there is a reason that in institutions you want people who have a lot of experience in leadership. They have seen all of this before; but you also want the idealism of youth. One of the big foundations that really tries to help churches in North America think about leadership points out that one of the problems we have in a lot of North American Protestantism right now with so many second career students is not the second career students, they are often fine pastors, but the cumulative effect is that we have too many leaders who are saying: There is nothing new under the sun. We do not have enough idealism. So, this is not the only message that needs to be heard. We need that idealism; that faith; that stepping out; but we also need this wisdom that recognizes that there is really nothing new under the sun.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, we say that the author traditionally was Solomon, and he identifies himself as the son of David, the king in Jerusalem; so, certainly that is consistent with that; and it is also consistent with what we know about Solomon, except this cannot have been Solomon when he was a young man. Whoever wrote this book was an old man, and he is rather cynical. He has seen it all, and he has lost that idealism of youth. That can be a bad thing, as you say. We still need to constantly be balancing the cynicism of age and experience with the enthusiasm and the possibilities that youth brings because both are true, and both are necessary as a corrective against the other.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right.

DAVE BAST

Okay, one of the problems with making sense out of life is that nothing seems to be new; nothing seems to make a long-term difference; it is all this cycle of birth and then age and then decline and death; and on and on it goes. Another problem then, that flows from that, says Qoheleth, is that none of our efforts seem to matter. They are all like striving after the wind. It is trying to chase and catch the wind, and that too, has some wisdom in it, but taken by itself, it is a little too negative, isn't it?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; and when he applies this catching of the wind, even, to the generations that come and go. In North America, we live with a high expectation that we will live to be in our 70s or 80s. We do not see the generations come and go that frequently, but when they do, it is sobering. I have lost three of my four parents within the last four years. I am very grateful for them, but there have been many occasions within the last year, in particular, when I lost my last parent – we lost our last parent – where you are poignantly aware that while all of the struggle of life, all of the work, all of the pain, and now that person is gone; that generation is gone; and we need to have a bigger frame in which to put life than just what we accumulate or what pleasures we have. There has to be something bigger.

DAVE BAST

Yes, a kind of melancholy can settle over you when your mind goes down that track of now the loss, and did anything matter? Did it even matter that one generation produces another when they just go through the same cycle?

There are some possibilities that we could look to to find meaning and purpose; and the Preacher is going to help us explore those. In fact, we are going to take one in each program; one from each section of these opening chapters of Ecclesiastes; and the first thing he is going to talk about is the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Maybe that is the answer. That is the thing that will give meaning to our lives. So, we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DUANE KELDERMAN

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

DUANE KELDERMAN

We are zeroing in, now, on one of the three things that Ecclesiastes says is futile, is vain, and that is the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

DAVE BAST

A chasing after the wind.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; which seems a little ironic, since this is supposedly a book of wisdom. He is this wise person, and now he is going to shoot himself in the foot and say: Wisdom is not everything it is cracked up to be.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you and I, Duane, we are taught in seminary to call this part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, and Solomon was supposedly the wisest man in all of the Bible, and here he is kind of pricking a balloon in the idea of knowledge or wisdom as the central pursuit in life – the thing that makes one wise. You know, the Greeks talked about *philosophy*, which means love of wisdom, and that was the best thing you could be was a philosopher, but Solomon does not necessarily agree. This, too, he says can be a chasing after the wind.

DUANE KELDERMAN

It is interesting to listen to these verses of Chapter 1 beginning in verse 12:

¹²I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on the human race. ¹⁴I have seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are meaningless; a chasing after the wind. ¹⁵What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. ¹⁶I said to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much wisdom and knowledge. ¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly; but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.”

DAVE BAST

He is speaking here as the voice of experience. Look, you want wisdom – you want to find meaning in that? I am the wisest person who has ever lived, and I tell you, it does not work. And this, too, is part of the burden. There is that reference again – we talked about this in our last program – this burden that God has laid on the human race.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And the problem, of course, is not knowledge itself; the problem is when we lay upon knowledge this expectation that somehow that will lead us to see life whole – to see eternity – to fulfill all of our deepest longings. Knowledge just will not do that.

DAVE BAST

Solomon in particular points out a couple of problems with knowledge or wisdom as the be all and the end all of human life. The first one I think he gets at in verse 15: What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. What he seems to be saying there is: Wisdom does not really work. Knowledge does not necessarily solve every problem. It does not necessarily make things better because the deeper problem is human beings themselves; it is our human nature. You can tell somebody what they ought to do – you can fix a problem for them, but they simply will not do it, and it is just frustration then.

DUANE KELDERMAN

As one of my friends said once, people are people. People do not change that much. People disappoint. We need to be very aware that knowledge does not lead to the perfectibility of the human race.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. There is an ancient Greek character from Homer's Iliad, the Princess Cassandra was her name. She was the daughter of the king of Troy and she was also a prophet; but her curse was she would always tell the truth. She had great wisdom, great knowledge, she could predict the future, but nobody would believe her, and so nobody would act upon the truth, and she kept telling them: Do not take that wooden horse into the city. Do not do it! It is a bad idea. And they would not listen. That is really a parable, I think, that Solomon is getting at of the problem – one of the central problems with knowledge – we just do not listen to it.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right.

DAVE BAST

How many times have we been told what is good for us: Do not eat too much. Do not smoke. Do not drive without seatbelts. And off we go.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Another way to get at that same thing, I think, is to say that we can know a lot, but that does not mean that we know ourselves proportionately. A lot of people know a lot of things, but they do not know themselves very well, and without self knowledge, we are not too far along.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think all of us probably have met really, really smart people who were idiots just because of the day-to-day choices they made or they were impossible to live with or they were stupid in terms of the real, practical wisdom of how to get along with people – how to have relationships – so there is that problem, too.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; and the last verse – actually, I did not read verse 18 earlier.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. I am reminded of that verse when you say what you just said, and I think that, for some people, too, we can have a lot of knowledge, and that knowledge can actually lead to a disproportionate amount of power over other people, but that does not make us good people; it does not make us generous people; and sometimes even the greater knowledge we have, the more power we have, the less love we have.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, it is very clear and obvious, I think, to everyone that sometimes knowledge leads to more harm, or does more harm, that it does good. You think of all the ways in which the incredible wisdom and intelligence of the human race has produced technology that has probably killed more people than it has helped. It seems like there is always this double edge. I think what Ecclesiastes is trying to warn us about is the unbridled optimism and enthusiasm of people who say: Oh, our technology is going to be our salvation. Aw, just give us more time, give us more research, give us more money and we will cure every illness and we will solve every problem. We have the answers. We are on this endless march of technological progress; and Ecclesiastes wants to say: Hey, wait a minute, time out; there is such a thing as the law of unintended consequences. There is such a thing as forbidden knowledge – knowing too much – of knowledge that will do more harm than it will do good.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. One of my children has done quite a bit of traveling overseas lately to different countries where there is tremendous poverty. These people do not have a fraction of what we have, but their economy of joy and happiness does not hinge upon how much they have or do not have; in fact, who knows, there may be an inverse correlation between the simplicity of their lives, the lack of progress, of knowledge, and actually enjoying life and living before the face of God the way that God really made us to live.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's talk about that a little bit more in just a bit. If wisdom is not the be all and end all, what should we do, and where should we go? I think Ecclesiastes will help us with that as well.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, and we are digging into Ecclesiastes Chapter 1, in this program, as we are searching for the practical wisdom that this book has to teach us. I am Dave Bast, along with Duane Kelderman.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And we have been talking about how knowledge and wisdom are a kind of a dead end if we think that knowledge and wisdom can give us the fullness of life. The point is not, of course, that knowledge in an of itself is bad; but when we place upon knowledge the expectation that then all of life will be good, and then all will be fulfilled, and then we will be able to perfect the human race, that is simply too big of a burden to place upon knowledge.

DAVE BAST

You know, as we read Ecclesiastes, I think some people's first reaction might be: What is this book doing in the Bible? It seems so negative; it seems so pessimistic and sour, and he is talking about the vanity of all things and there is nothing new and nothing matters, and nothing seems to make a difference or change. There is no progress. All of our efforts are futile; they are like chasing the wind; and we ask: Whoa, wait a minute. How does this square with the rest of the message of the Bible? What is this book doing here?

DUANE KELDERMAN

The first answer to that question is: Well, it is just true. It is true that life is this way. It reminds me of when I started out in the ministry – I actually was not even ordained yet. I was doing an internship in Iowa City, Iowa, and I preached this sermon. It was an Old Testament/New Testament combo. The Old Testament text was vanity of vanities, all is vanity; and my New Testament text was 1 Corinthians 15:58, where it says: Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a great passage – it is a great text.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And basically, I used the New Testament passage to club the Old Testament passage and destroy it; and I had a gentleman come up to me at the end of that sermon – and of course, I am a new – I am a seminarian – I am just new in this business...

DAVE BAST

Right, nervous.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And he says, “I just want you to know that you tried to destroy my favorite book of the Bible.” The point is, this is true. You ask why is this in the Bible. Because this is what is true about life, and that gentleman actually taught me a tremendous amount about life in that year that I was there; and there is a kind of holy skepticism about life that is appropriate, and a holy skepticism about knowledge. He happened to be PhD in mathematics.

DAVE BAST

Well, you remind me with that story of one of the lectures I remember from seminary: Ten reasons why sermons misfire. One of the reasons was: You give with your right hand and take away with your left. We need these different parts of scripture as correctives, and Ecclesiastes is trying to do some demolition work on our sense of confidence; our unbridled optimism – sort of Pollyanna – Oh, everything is possible; everything is doable; everything is getting better. And without God, that is simply not true.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But, here is the question; let’s get back to the question about knowledge and wisdom. So, do we simply dismiss it altogether and turn Amish and say: Okay, nobody should have anything more than an 8th grade education and get on with life and go out and live? That is not really the alternative that Ecclesiastes is suggesting, is it?

DUANE KELDERMAN

No, I do not think so. I think, as we have said before, the problem is not with knowledge; the problem is when we expect knowledge to carry too much freight; when we expect our knowledge, our capacity to put life together; to be able to really put life together we have to accept that we are human and that we do not see the whole picture. Let God be God. We are to be human, and that ties right into the other competing message with this book, and that is enjoy life; live within the limits that God has made you to have.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and the refrain that keeps coming: To fear God; to fear God. It occurs over and over. It is another one of the things that Solomon keeps saying in this book, which does not, as has often been pointed out, does not mean that we go in terror of God; although I do not think we should too quickly empty that word *fear* of all of its connotations about not taking God for granted; but to sort of hold him in awe and reverence; to lower ourselves to the daily tasks that he has given us; not to set ourselves up as alternative gods who are going to save ourselves through our own technology. This is the message that we are being told, and if we are wise, we will listen to it.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right. You know, you might listen to that story that I told about this person who came up to me in that first church and said, “You tried to destroy my favorite book of the Bible,” and say, “Oh, he must be a dour,

negative, pessimistic person.” Actually, this person – I got to know him very well, and he loved to fish. He loved to spend time with his grandkids fishing. I think he had life pretty figured out. As I said earlier, he had a PhD in mathematics. He could have kept probing the edge of things, and that would have been okay. We have people who do that. But he had a sense of balance about his life that I think the book of Ecclesiastes would have admired, and maybe that is a good place to end this discussion of the limits of knowledge. At the end of the day, we can be the best mathematician in the world, but we still need to be able to enjoy the simple things of life and fish with our grandkids.

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