

Ecclesiastes And The Feast Of Tabernacles (Part 1)

The Purpose of the Feast of Tabernacles

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 11-Sep-93; Sermon #093

As we approach this year's Feast of Tabernacles, I think it is a good idea for us to go through a book that clearly has teaching essential to a proper understanding of both keeping the Feast of Tabernacles and our every day Christian life.

We have been taught that the Feast pictures the Millennium and Christ's reign on earth. However, that is not what the Bible concentrates on in its direct instruction regarding the Feast of Tabernacles. I am not saying we have been taught wrong. I am only saying that what we were taught is something that is *perceived* from the Bible rather than something that is directly taught.

You will recall that the Jews have a system of scriptural reading that emphasizes certain passages at appropriate times during the year. Actually, this is a three-year cycle they begin and at the end of three years, they are right back to where they were at the beginning of that three-year period.

During that three-year, period there are certain passages that are assigned more than once. In fact, there are certain passages that are assigned for every year regardless of where one finds oneself in the cycle. These particular scriptures are assigned to be read and expounded upon, to be the subject of sermons at particular times.

You are familiar with the Song of Solomon. That is supposed to be read and sermonized on during the Days of Unleavened Bread—every year during the three-year cycle. The book of Ruth—the same thing occurs at the time of Pentecost. And Ecclesiastes is expounded on at the Feast of Tabernacles. The reason is that they felt that the subject material was appropriate to the revealed meaning of the days, as well as being practical guides for the conduct of one's life.

Each of these books has its own theme. The Song of Solomon is accented toward a woman—a young woman, would be a little bit more specific and accurate. Ruth deals with the conversion of the Gentiles and ultimately the conversion of the whole world. Proverbs (which is not part of this particular series) is accented toward a young man. Ecclesiastes is a treatise containing proverbs.

A treatise is a formal and systematic account of something. Most of us call the writings of the apostles in the New Testament "epistles," that is, they were letters. The book of Hebrews, though, is not a letter. The closest thing that it comes to is a treatise. We might call it today (more commonly) an essay on something. Ecclesiastes fits into the same mold as the book of Hebrews although their subject material is vastly different.

The word Ecclesiastes is an English translation of the Hebrew *qoheleth*. It has no religious connotations to it at all, even though it says in the beginning of the book, "the Preacher." The word has no religious connotations. It simply means "one who speaks in an assembly." We would call such a person today a lecturer.

The book is almost unanimously agreed to be the work of one man, but quite a number of the world's scholars are not sure, though, that Solomon was that one man. The consensus is that it is Solomon, though, king of Israel. What he did was gather divergent views and reached conclusions.

There is one main conclusion and quite a number of secondary conclusions. One of the things you want to be aware of if you ever go into a study of this book is that it is not a happy, upbeat work, but rather it shows very strong streaks of pessimism, weariness, even despair and disappointment with life.

So strong are these themes that the scholars feel that it was written by someone we would call unconverted—that it is the reasoning of a natural man. If Solomon did write it, it appears to have been written at a very low spiritual ebb in his life, perhaps when he was old and he was looking back on a life he considered to be a failure.

The general theme for you and me—and in a way this is something that is perceived; it is a conclusion that is reached not from any definitive that is

within it, but rather a consensus of opinions that are sprinkled throughout the book—is: How does one get the most out of life and still carry something worthwhile through the grave?

The main conclusion is: "Fear God and keep His commandments. This is the whole man." That conclusion is not reached until the next to the last verse in the entire book. The reason Solomon gives for that conclusion is given in the very next verse, and that is that we must, in the final analysis, give account to God for all that we do. Therefore, the first priority in life has to be to please God because everybody is going to give account to Him.

If life is going to be successful at all, it is going to have to be because a person, regardless of the circumstances of his life—whether he is godly or ungodly, whether he is righteous or unrighteous, whether he is a good person or a sinner—everybody is going to have to give account to God.

If you are going to receive the benefit from the book of Ecclesiastes—and let's extend this out—if you are going to receive the benefit of the Feast of Tabernacles, it is going to be because you look at life the way the book of Ecclesiastes is teaching that we should look at it. You not only look at it, but you direct your life in that direction and that is, you fear God and you keep His commandments.

I challenge you to look at Deuteronomy 14 and find out the reason why we go to the Feast—that you may fear God. There is a direct connection between why the Jews chose this book to be read at the Feast of Tabernacles above all the other books in the Bible.

I want you to observe that it is not a happy book. Life in general is full of all kinds of twists and turns and unexpected things that can put us into a blue funk if we do not watch out—not only put us into a funk, but make us as depressed, as frustrated, and as despairing as Solomon appears to be when he is writing this book.

Solomon did not lose his sense completely, because his conclusion was to fear God and keep His commandments. His perspective was not entirely lost.

It is not a happy book and life has every opportunity to not be very happy. The reason that Solomon gives is that we must give account to God for all we do. Therefore, we must give priority to Him in all things.

The secondary conclusions regarding the relative importance of specific activities are reached throughout the book and we will get to some of them as we go along.

We are not going to begin in the book of Ecclesiastes. We are going to go to I John 2:15, and there is a specific reason why I am beginning here. Look at the context.

I John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

I want you to consider this deeply as we prepare the groundwork for this sermon. Look at the context here.

I John 2:16-17 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God ["fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole man"] abides forever.

If there is any New Testament verse which summarizes the theme of Ecclesiastes, it is I John 2:17. God calls things that are not as though they are. To God, the world is already dead. *Love not the world*. It is passing away—a euphemistic approach to that. To God, the world is dead, it is a corpse, it is putrefying, but it has not yet been buried. It is a system that is in the process of self-destructing and it cannot be any other way because men and demons are operating it. It is self-destructing as a result of the course of vanity and meaningless self-centeredness.

Think of this: the world is passing away. Think of the main conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes, of the priority that a person ought to set in his life, and that is to fear God and keep His commandments.

Let us go back to the book of Leviticus and in the chapter that has all of the holy days listed in it. Here we are focusing in these verses on the Feast of Tabernacles.

Leviticus 23:39-43 'Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; on the first day there shall be a Sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a Sabbath-rest. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, [look at this reason:] that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.'

God **made** them dwell in booths. Eventually it is going to be for their benefit that they dwelt in booths, but right now, it is for our benefit that they dwelt in booths. We are to learn something from that—something that has very much to do with the book of Ecclesiastes, something that has very much to do with what we are in reality, spiritually, before God.

The direct focus of the Feast of Tabernacles is on the booths, which depict temporariness and pilgrimage. Do you remember when Israel came out of Egypt it said God did not take them by way of the Philistines, lest they see war and return to Egypt? Instead, God took them another way. As a matter of fact, they made a very sharp right hand turn to the south and went away from the land of promise rather than toward it, on a journey that eventually took them forty years to get from point A to point B.

God *made* them journey—pilgrimage, live in booths—for forty years. That was a lesson for them and for us. It has very much to do with life in general. It has very much to do with what the Feast of Tabernacles pictures.

A booth lasts but a short time and in no way can it picture permanence. It is a type of dwelling a people on the move toward a destination would expect to live in. It would compare favorably today with a tent—not a home, not a brick home, not something that has a foundation that is permanently established in one place, but rather a dwelling that can be folded up and taken to another location—taken because the person who owns it is on the move. He is not in a settled place of residence, but he is moving on.

Another spiritual application is derived from the mention of "after you have gathered in the fruits of the land" (Leviticus 23:39.) Pentecost and Tabernacles are harvest feasts. Pentecost is the smaller firstfruits and Tabernacles the larger second harvest.

I said "another" because in reflecting back on the booths, we find something that is of importance to a New Testament Christian in I Peter 2, as the pieces of this begin to tie together.

I Peter 2:11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

The Israelites literally moved from one place to another and that is why they dwelt in booths. This was according to the design of God. He made them dwell in booths.

As I said, it will ultimately be something that is of spiritual benefit to them, but right now it is a spiritual benefit to us. Having received the Spirit of God and a part of God's spiritual purpose, we have to understand ourselves as being on the move. We are a pilgrim. This earth, this nation, this area of the country is not to be considered by us as permanent. Even though we do not live in a tent that we can fold up and carry to another location, we are to understand that where we are now living is by God's design, intended by Him to be only a temporary dwelling place. We are a people on the move toward the Kingdom of God. The land in which we are now pilgrims is no longer to be considered our permanent residence.

Because of the booths, the Feast of Tabernacles focuses on the contrast between temporary and permanence. On the one hand, it looks forward to the Kingdom of God, the reign of Christ, the Millennium, and the permanence

that is going to begin whenever Jesus Christ returns and establishes His government, His way, on earth as compared to the temporariness of our condition right now. We can look forward to permanence in terms of life itself—eternally. But right now life itself is temporary and we face death—living in this death as Paul called it in II Corinthians 5.

It is in this area that the book of Ecclesiastes comes into the Tabernacles theme. It does this by focusing on that which is temporary. Unlike the Feast of Tabernacles, Ecclesiastes says almost nothing about eternity; it says almost nothing about permanence. It is heavily overloaded toward temporariness, vanity, futility, meaningless. I know that it is God's intention that by focusing on this with such strength and such force we will be moved to be grateful for, to think about, and to rejoice in the permanence that has begun to be a part of our lives—what we can look forward to as a part of the Kingdom of God.

It is because of this focus that the book of Ecclesiastes gives, that it is so generally depressing and negative in its cast, its inclination. Life, without the right reason to be living it, is futile and vain. It is not something that would give any thinking person reason for anticipation of anything good happening, except for some occasional period of a sense of well-being through family experiences, religion, art, work, money, and sometimes even folly.

Turn with me to a very encouraging verse in Romans 8.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

I John gives us an overview of what to do in the light of the way life is, in the light of what is written in the book of Ecclesiastes. God very plainly says, "Do not love the world." It is a dead-end because it is dying, if not already dead. It is a putrefying mess, but it captures the essence of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Here is a verse that captures the essence of what a Christian must, *absolutely must*, have faith in if he is going to conduct his life without falling into the same state of mind that Solomon did. We can fall into the same sort of

circumstances and thinking as is shown in the book of Ecclesiastes. We are subject to our own unstable convictions, opinions, and decisions.

In addition to that we are subject to decisions and circumstances that others make and over which we have no control, but it causes us to get into a blue funk. We seem to be powerless about people making these decisions, so that life seems unfair that anything like this should happen.

We cannot lose our perspective! This is the right perspective for a Christian. What we have here is a wonderfully encouraging and comforting promise. However, it does not automatically apply to everybody. There are two conditions that must be met.

One is, we must respond to God's grace, to God's gift, to His calling, to His gift of Christ, to His gift of the Holy Spirit, to His gift of opening up to us knowledge and understanding of what is going on. We must respond—that is, love God in return.

The second one is that we must be one of *the* called according to His purpose. I might interject here, one of the elect. This does not apply to people who have merely received an invitation from God, because that invitation goes out to many more than actually respond to it. Just as in advertising, the call, the invitation, may go out over radio, television, or through the newspaper to millions of people. But not very many people respond as compared to those who are invited. The calling of God is very similar to that. The invitation goes out to many more, but very few are part of the elect. That is what is being inferred here.

Not only must we respond, but we must be part of the elect. If we are, if we meet those conditions, then God is with us and we can be encouraged and we can take comfort in that.

Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son [here comes part of God's gift of grace] in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.

Christ came as a human being and He had to deal with life the same way as we do. He had the same time, space, and constraints as we do. He got tired; He had to eat—all of those things we go through. Was He subject to the futility of this world? Was He subject to decisions made by others that were beyond His control? Was He subject to persecution? Was He subject to pain? Did He get tired? Did He get caught in other people's dilemmas? Did the court system treat Him in an advantageous way? No, it did not. He received a very unjust trial. He did not get the decision He deserved and His life was taken away as a result of it. When He was on the stake He suffered pain, unjustly. He had to deal with things the same way as we do.

What this does for you and me is—because of God's calling and because of the response we have made—God adds to the gift. He not only gave His Son, but now He gives His Spirit. We find in verse 11 that if we have that Spirit, we have the beginnings, the down payment, on immortality, on eternal life. We become sons and daughters of this Great God. We are drawn into a family, and this family is not only a family in the normal sense, but we become brothers and sisters of Christ in another area as well that is equally important. It has something to do with the fact that He too was subject to the same kind of suffering as we are—the unfairness of life.

Hebrews 2:10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation [Jesus the Christ] perfect through sufferings.

Where did this suffering come from? It came as a result of having to live in this very despairing world that Solomon lived in and wrote about, and be subject to circumstances that were beyond one's control.

If everything had been under the control of a righteous person like Jesus Christ, those things would have never happened. But He was surrounded by sin and despite His righteousness, He was subject to the futility, vanity, and meaningless of this world.

But what did He do? He rose above it because He believed what is now Romans 8:28, and He lived it.

Hebrews 2:11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified [that is you and me] are all of one . . .

All what? We are one group, one family. There is something in the context of Hebrews 2:10-11 and Romans 8 that we have in common with Christ. We are all suffering in this world and in that sense there is a family relationship, a commonality, that ties us together. So it says in verse 11:

Hebrews 2:11 . . . [We] are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

Romans 8:17 And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Do not ever lose sight, as we go through this sermon, of the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. Do not lose sight of a major reason why we are keeping the Feast of Tabernacles. It has to do with this pilgrimage. It has to do with the suffering that we do on the pilgrimage on the way to permanence while we are living in this very temporary world!

This temporary world is not a happy place. It is frustrating and vanity-filled! But we are here! What are we going to do with it? You know God's wish—His will, His desire—is that we rise above it by means of the knowledge and the Spirit that He has given to us. If we go through with the suffering then we can be glorified together.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

It is coming, but it is not here yet.

Romans 8:20 For the creation [look at this—think about Ecclesiastes] was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him [God] . . .

In other words, it was not something the creation (which is personified as being a living being) would have chosen if it had a choice.

Romans 8:20 . . . [But God subjected it to futility because of Him] who subjected it in hope.

—the "hope" being that out of this futility would come something better than what it started with.

So Christ was perfected through suffering. He was made subject to the things that were a part of this world. We find that the whole creation is subjected to futility, or vanity, or meaninglessness through which, like Christ, we must deal with.

But you see, Paul keeps carrying the theme on here, and by the time we get to verse 28 we find that those who love God and who are the called according to His purpose, that life is not meaningless to us because God is with us to bring good from this world—if we cooperate with Him and His purpose and not lose faith.

With that background, let us go to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?"

The very first statement covers the entirety of the treatise and made possible the application given it by the Jews.

Vanity is a word that you are familiar with in another form. It appears very early in the Bible in the name that was given to the second person born on earth—Abel. That was his name. Vanity, she called him. It signifies, in its simplest form, a breath. It is nothing. That is what it means—nothing.

A breath has a very short term of life, does it not? You take one. You breath in, you breath out, and then you take another one. It only last for just a second. When we begin to carry out the application of this word,

temporariness begins to come to the fore because a breath of a person is very temporary and very quickly replaced by another, and another, and another breath. So it signifies something that is nothing, impermanent, temporary. But that hardly exhausts its meaning.

This phrase "vanity of vanities" is written in superlative form. It is very similar in its application as "Holy of Holies." That is the superlative form in the Hebrew. Another one you are familiar with is the Song of Songs, sometimes called Canticles, sometimes called Song of Solomon. But the Hebrew name is Song of Songs. It is a superlative form.

Vanity of vanities—modern translators tend to translate this word "meaningless." A single breath has no meaning to it. Some have gone so far as to translate it "absurd." In a way, I think that this fits the context of the book the best (the word absurd), because the word absurd in English means "irrational." It is an affront to reason; something that does not fit the order and purpose that we seek from life. That is what Solomon was getting at.

He said, "Life is absurd. Why do we live? All of our life we live here working, doing things, and at the end of it what does a person have to show for what he has done? It is absurd, it is irrational, it is meaningless."

A booth is temporary. God made Israel dwell in booths. Nobody in his or her right mind would ever choose a booth to live in. Do you know why? Because they would no sooner get it up than the thing would begin deteriorating. If it lasted the whole eight days of the Feast, I imagine it was considered a minor miracle if it lasted that long without all the leaves falling off and being able to look up and see the sun and stars and hope that it did not rain.

Nobody would ever choose to live in a booth of the kind that God wanted them to live in. God made them do it to get across a powerful and important lesson. The lesson to you and me is life in the flesh is just as useful (in its normal sense) as a booth—just as temporary *unless* one is seeing life from the point of view Paul saw it in Romans 8. From that perspective in which God is the dominant aspect of a person's life, then God becomes something that is profitable to an extreme.

Remember the contrast? The Feast of Tabernacles focuses on the contrast between that which is temporary and that which is permanent. A booth is temporary. It quickly deteriorates; it loses its original beauty and it becomes meaningless, useless, a piece of trash once its use is finished, except maybe to supply some heat at a fire. Such is life apart from the right reason for living.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul makes a comment in regard to life that is important to you and me.

I Corinthians 15:19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

Is your hope in this life or are you going toward the Promised Land? Is the focus in your life on that which is temporary, impermanent, on material things, on the things that this world can indeed supply? Jesus put it this way: "Seek you first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added."

One's goals and conduct in this life always have to be viewed with the Kingdom of God in mind or our lives become unbalanced by doing everything for vain reasons. It is very easy, indeed natural, to go in that direction, and that is why one must consciously chose to think and act with God and the Kingdom of God in mind.

When Solomon said there is no profit in verse 3, he means that there is nothing in this world that makes life worth living. How depressing!

Ecclesiastes was apparently written as the conclusion to an experiment that appears to have been spread over many years, maybe even an entire lifetime. Solomon was eminently qualified to write this. He was intelligent. I do not think that anybody denies that. He was given understanding as a special gift by God. That is what he asked for. He did not ask for wisdom but understanding that he might be wise. Understanding has to precede the right application. If you do not understand the situation, you will not be wise. So, he asked God for understanding.

He was intelligent, with a special gift of understanding, and from that developed wisdom. He had power because he was king in Israel; authority that went with that. He had money, perhaps like nobody else has ever experienced in the history of mankind. Solomon was no square. He was active, inquiring, and he had an analytical mind, and he reached conclusions that were logical and right given the circumstances and given the information he was given.

So what follows after he states his theme? (That is the theme right there.) Life is irrational; life is absurd; life is meaningless. You can tell he was not in a happy frame of mind.

In verse 4 of Ecclesiastes 1, he further states his purpose, and in this case he is beginning to state why he found life to be vain and empty and futile.

Ecclesiastes 1:4-8 One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

He begins to direct your thinking toward the kind of world that we live in. On the one hand, it is constantly changing, as with the seasons. Sometimes it is raining; sometimes it is sunshine; sometimes it is cloudy and no rain falls. Sometimes it is hot; sometimes it is cold; and yet even though these things are going on, the seasons change from one to the other and there is constant repetition, yet nothing really changes.

Summer disappears and on comes fall. What happens every fall? The leaves change color and they fall from the trees; the trees are bare and then comes snow. It gets cold and then spring comes and everything seems to be reborn. Summer comes and it gets hot and you see that cycle repeating itself over and over again. Even though there is constant change—everything is changing, but everything remains the same. You have heard the statement,

"The more things change, the more things stay the same." That begins to become a part of the theme. He is drawing from this a general picture of hopelessness because there is no enduring quality to the environment in which we live.

He wants you to go one step further, and that is that happiness does not come from nature. That is not where life and its right quality are. This is because nature, though it does witness of a Creator, it does not of itself give meaning to life. It witnesses to the fact that there is life. It witnesses to the fact that its life came from somewhere, but because it is constantly repetitious, nature does not give us any real direction concerning life's meaning.

That is what Solomon is searching for here. Is there meaning in everything that is going on or is life just absurd and irrational? Every generation struggles to find meaning in their experiences, but ends up involving themselves in mere novelties that give them only temporary happiness.

Some of us here went through the '60s and the rise of the beatnik generation. What did those people do? What is the catch phrase? "They dropped out." Why? The reason they gave was there was no meaning to life. So, by and large, those people became hobos, drug addicts, living (in many cases) in dirt and filth until they got to the place where they were so sick and tired of it, they made a change in their lives. And then what happened? The change they made was to get back into the system once again because there was no profit being dropped out. But they had to learn that themselves. Every generation goes through a form of that kind of thing.

In an earlier generation, we had the "roaring '20s." In an earlier generation we had the "gay '90s," and so it goes. As each generation searches for meaning, and just like the weather, just like our environment, things keep changing but they always remain the same.

"This is absurd!" Solomon said. Maybe it is that way, but it was subjected to vanity by the Great Creator and He permitted it to be that way.

Solomon says that the eye and the ear (in verse 8) take all of this in and they are wearied, but they are never satisfied with lasting joy and contentment. There is a conclusion that can be reached here, even though it is not directly

stated, and it is something that all of us need to learn—that happiness does not lie in an environment. I mean, it does not lie living at a certain part of the country. That does not mean you do not have a choice, but just understand that where you live (you may live there by choice), that happiness is not directly attached to the environment. If you put your faith in living in a certain environment and that is part of your guiding principle, you will find out that you are going to be sadly disappointed.

That is not where happiness comes from. Do you know why? Because the real problem is not the environment. The real problem is what we take with us wherever we go: It is our mind; it is human nature.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Solomon says, "No new thing." No matter what men invent, the basic motivation that brought the thing into being is not new. The "thing" in this context is not a thing as we might normally think of a thing. Remember, this is a treatise on life. It is not a treatise on technology. For example, we have a lot of new things that come along, such as lasers, hydrogen bombs, and automobiles. In this context, are those things really new? They are new technologically, but that is not what Solomon is talking about. Those things are simply other tools that will have no impact on understanding the meaning of life.

A laser will have no more impact than the automobile does. Men will see all kinds of possibilities in which they can use this new technology, but is it going to make life any less vanity filled? Is it going to give meaning to life? No, it is not. No more than the automobile, no more than the buggy did before the automobile, no more than the wheel did before the buggy, because human nature never changes. Satan never changes. God never changes.

So the more things change, the more they stay the same. That can be awfully frustrating to someone who is a thinking individual, who is looking at life and wondering where in the world is life headed. That includes (I think) most of the people in the world. There is no new thing in terms of what Solomon is dealing with.

Let us go to verse 12. Incidentally, verse 11 is the end of the prologue. He has made his statement regarding where he is headed. This is going to be the foundation for everything else that follows. Now he is going to begin to state the reasons why he came to this conclusion.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-13 I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised.

God subjected the creation to futility and He did it by reason of hope; He did it because He wants us to think about life and the way it is whenever He allows human nature to have sway—to have dominion—over what is going on on earth and in our lives.

Do we want to live this way? Do we want life to be permanently this way? Is there a better way? Are we willing to do something about it so we are part of a better way—a way that is not subjected to futility, but a way that is going to be permanent and enduring and is filled with productivity, rejoicing, and a sense of well-being that never ends? Which way do we want? God wants us to go the right way and so He has then subjected us to living within it.

Ecclesiastes 1:14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.

What an illustration—grasping for wind. You cannot catch the wind. It is here one moment, and the moment you feel it, it is already somewhere else.

Ecclesiastes 1:15-18 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Solomon had a great deal to begin with in the way of gifts for doing what he did here. His conclusion is that he can find nothing in man's labors that provide positive meaning for life. Later on he is going to tell us that work is good and that we should throw ourselves into it with all of our might, but we should not look to work and what we produce in that work as providing meaning for life.

I think you understand that the meaning of life is something that must be revealed by God. It comes about as a result as a gift from Him, through His calling, and through His election of us. But God never intended that the things of this life give meaning to life. If they give us meaning for life, then we are going to focus our efforts on those things which we think are giving us meaning, and we are going to reach the same conclusions that Solomon did—that life is frustrating and absurd.

A man, Solomon said, gets wisdom and knowledge, and then what happens? He finds out that he cannot use it to make things better. "The crooked cannot be made straight." He is not talking about a piece of iron that has been bent and cannot be straightened out. He is not talking about a board that has been bent and cannot be straightened out. He is talking about the things of life, of living, and once a thing is done, it is done. It cannot be changed.

If a person in their youth—and this is one of the clearest illustrations that I know of—commits fornication and their virginity is taken away, it is gone. The crooked cannot be made straight.

Words go out of our mouth, the sound goes forth, and it cannot be recalled. The things of life that really count, they happen, and they cannot be reversed because they have happened. Even God cannot change that because it is an action that is been done and the action cannot be recalled. The crooked cannot be made straight.

Solomon then extrapolated on that and he began to apply it to situations in government. There are corrupt officials and they do things that really cannot be reversed. A person finds himself (you might say) battling city hall, and he cannot change anything because the whole system is so corrupt. It is being driven by human nature that is corrupt and it is being driven by the nature of Satan the Devil. So if a person happens to be righteous in the midst of all of

this corruption and they have a certain amount of wisdom from God, even if they try to change things, they are overwhelmed by the vanity, the meaningless, by the absurdity of sin and the corruption of character every place one turns. Even one as righteous as Jesus Christ could not turn the system around. What is crooked cannot be made straight.

You can begin to understand why God is going to have to allow the entire system to be destroyed and start all over again! Babylon is going to have to reach a point of corruption that is so great that everybody who is converted is going to know that it is a righteous and just thing that God does in allowing it to be smashed to smithereens—as He pictures it in Daniel 7 of the stone hitting the image on the feet and everything being turned into dust and blown by the wind into oblivion.

That is why the Bible calls the Christian a new creation. You cannot change the old. A new creation has to come along and take the place there.

There are so many things wrong in society that they are beyond counting. They are moving relentlessly from bad to worse. Evil men wax worse and worse. We sometimes wonder in desperation how can it get any worse than it is now. It will. That is not a cheerful thought. As I told you, the book of Ecclesiastes is not a happy book. It is rather a despairing book filled with frustration because here was a man (apparently) who could not figure out why things were the way they were. So he wrote this.

Let me interject something here. If I do not put this in, I think we are going to get the wrong impression. Even though Solomon says it cannot be straightened out, and the rest of the Bible agrees with that, that is not to say that we should not try to make things straight. God is not saying that. He is just giving us the right perspective on things so we do not get frustrated, so that we do not lose hope or lose sight of why things are the way they are. Understand that this is the observation of a man without God; an observation that is based on his own experience and reasoning without the revelation of God's involvement in our lives.

We have to cooperate with God. We are a new creation and above all things we ought to be striving to change things in our lives. It can be done in our lives because God, the Great Creator, is working with us. We might not be

able to change things in other people's lives; we might not be able to change things in society; we might not be able to really affect city hall, but we can, with the help of God, change ourselves. So let us get the right perspective.

When we feed Romans 8:20 back into this, we understand that it is part of God's plan that a person come to grips with this reality and not put his hopes in this world. Rather, then, we are to use the physical only as a means to an end, and that purpose, that means, is to ensure that we carry something worthwhile through the grave. That will occur if we use the suffering that this world is going to bring on us because we are going against the current. We are not going along with the force that is driving this world, but rather we are going along with the force (if I can put it that way) that motivates God, and that is His love.

Let us conclude for this sermon in Hebrews 1. In the next sermon we will move a great deal faster since we have laid a foundation and we will be able to go through Ecclesiastes a lot more rapidly. Verse 10 says this (I want you to contrast this with the earth because the earth abides forever):

Hebrews 1:10-12 "You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail."

Here is a vivid contrast to Ecclesiastes 1. In nature, everything is undergoing a constant repetition of change and remaining the same, from one generation to another. But the contrast between this and God is that God changes not. He is permanent.

Though Solomon reaches the despairing conclusion that the crooked cannot be made straight, God is saying, on the other hand to His children, that now is the time to effect positive, worthwhile changes that can be made with the help of God; changes that will eventually become a permanent part of our personality because the Great Creator is working within us.

We find ourselves, then, in a situation where life appears to be vain and absurd, but for the Christian it is not. God has designed things so that we,

being able to see the contrast, consciously make the choice or choices in our lives to move toward that which is permanent and effect the changes that need to be made to be carried through the grave.