

Vanity (Part 1)

Futility and Worthlessness

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There is a rather amusing description of the life of a man that you can occasionally find in a commentary. I found this in Adam Clark's, and he in turn said that he had found it in some ancient Jewish writings of some of their sages I guess. Apparently from their observation, these Jews perceived that a man's life is divided into seven stages. From birth to age 2, a boy is in his "king" stage (they called it), because he is served hand and foot, and his every whim is provided for.

From ages 2 to 9 he is in his "pig" years, because as his life shows, he is sloppy about everything, and has little or no sense of responsibility.

From age 10 to 15 he is in his "goat" years because he is running all over the place, and he cannot seem to make up his mind about what he wants to do.

From age 15 to 25 he is in his "horse" years, neighing after the opposite sex.

From age 26 through 40 he is in his "ass" stage because he is burdened down with debt, and is trying to make his way in the world.

From age 41 through 55 he has reached the "dog" stage, because now he is groveling. He missed out on the big money, but he still has dreams and is trying anything to see whether it will work.

Finally from age 56 till death he is in the "ape" stage, because by now he is beaten down, realizing that the good things in life have somehow escaped him.

I would have to say, that all in all, this does not present a very positive and encouraging outlook on life. Oh! To remain a king at the age of two!

God-willing, I am going to be giving a 2-part series that is going to touch on this subject that we just had a little bit of fun with. The subject is going to be vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 12:8 Vanity of vanities, says the preacher; all is vanity.

So after writing this treatise on the subject, the book opens with "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity," and the book closes just before a final summation. Solomon is still convinced that everything is vanity. If this is true as it is written, without any modification from any other scriptures, then it is one of the most astounding statements about life in all of Scripture, because this is an all-encompassing statement. Everything is vanity.

According to *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, the primary English usage of vanity encompasses emptiness, falsity, and vain glory. This is interesting, because it is virtually the same as what the Hebrew and Greek words use in the Bible also mean. All of life is emptiness, falsity (deceit), and vain glory.

The third usage is the one we are most familiar with, and that is the condition or character of being vain; excessive personal pride, conceit, ambitious display, or ostentation. We usually think of this in terms of people who promote themselves through vigorous marketing of a public persona that they have adopted. You can probably think of some athletes, and some in the film industry who are like this.

Herbert Armstrong's definition is: "An often unrealized craving of the adoration of other people which springs from inherent feelings of inferiority, and asserts itself in a natural effort to rise above the unpleasant feelings of inferiority. The elevating of self above others so as to be well thought of." By that definition, vanity is nothing short of idolatry.

There are five Hebrew and two Greek words all translated into the single English word "vanity." Some of these same Hebrew and Greek words are also translated into other English words with which you are probably more familiar.

In Ecclesiastes 1:2 the word translated vanity is *hebel*, and it literally means "a breath, a vapor." Thus metaphorically it means "transitory, worthless, insubstantial, emptiness." There is just nothing to it. It is futile, meaningless, without profit.

You are familiar with this word in another context altogether. In Genesis 4:2 it says, "She again bare his brother Abel." The same word is translated "Abel" here, used as a proper noun, but it means exactly the same thing as "vanity" does in the book of Ecclesiastes. Abel was nothing more than a breath! We could say he was worthless, he was meaningless, he was futile. I do not know which side of the bed Eve got out of that morning whenever that child was named! Maybe God inspired it because He wanted to teach us something.

This word, translated into the English "vanity," is very commonly used. In the book of Ecclesiastes alone it appears 37 times, which is quite a number for one book, so you know what was on Solomon's mind when he was writing that.

Another Hebrew word is *shav*. Transliterated into English, this word more literally means foul, desolating, ruinous, worthless, false. With this word the concept or the idea of evil is introduced into the overall concept of vanity. For instance, you will read in the English, "You shall not bear a false report"—false there being *shav*.

Very interestingly, this word appears in the commandments. In the third commandment it is translated "vain." "You shall not bear the name of the LORD your God in *shav*." "You shall not take. . ." I used a little bit different word for the word "take." Normally that word is "take," but it means pick up and carry, and therefore to bear. So there is an indirect warning to the children of God—those who bear the name of God—that they had better not bear it in a vain way, in a ruinous way, in a worthless way, in a transitory way.

The next one is a word that phonetically is spelled *rik*. Sometimes it is spelled not phonetically when it is transliterated into *reek*. This word describes something that is going to end in failure, such as a practice that a person is doing, a project they are working on or involved in. People can foresee that no good is going to come from this. That is *reek*. It is vain.

This next one you will recognize immediately. It appears right at the very beginning of the Bible. It is *tohu*, as in *tohu* and *bohu*. It is translated in other places as confusion, waste, desolation, and in Genesis 1 as "without form and void."

The next one is very intriguing. It is the Hebrew word *aven*. It is intriguing because this word is not frequently translated into the word "vanity." It is almost exclusively translated by the word "iniquity." This word is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *hamartia*—to miss the mark. That is its more literal application. It means to miss the mark, to pant, to exert in vain, nothingness. This word is very frequently translated "vanity" in relation to idols, and God, as we are going to see later. It calls idols *aven*: iniquity, vanity.

The other of the two Greek words is *matahyotace*. It is the Greek equivalent of *hebel*, and it means the same thing as *hebel* does: futility, empty, transitory, profitless. This one appears in Romans 8, and I want you to look at this so that we at least get it into our minds as we begin the sermon.

Romans 8:20 For the creation was made subject to vanity [*matahyotace*], not willingly, but by reason of Him who has subjected the same in hope.

That word will also be translated from time to time "futility." So God created the earth subject to vanity.

The final Greek word is *ek*. It means "without reason; failure." It appears in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:22 where it is translated "without a cause." "You shall not hate your brother without a cause."

There is a strong tendency in us to associate vanity in only one major area of life. We associate vanity in the sense of excessive personal pride regarding one's appearance, or we might say in regard to what others think of us. So a person having this is driven by his vanity to rise to meet what he thinks those expectations are. However, the Bible's approach to vanity is *huge* by comparison.

When Solomon was moved to say, "Vanity of vanities; everything is vanity," that is a *big* subject. I know it is God's intention that we think about this very thoroughly. You might remember Richard's explanation in the sermon he gave on the Song of Songs and Holy of Holies. He explained that Song of Songs was a superlative form in the Hebrew language, as is Holy of Holies. Well, vanity of vanities is the superlative, and all three of these words, or phrases, are at the very pinnacle of their category.

We know some of Solomon's history, and this might prejudice us to think that he wrote Ecclesiastes in a spirit of cynicism and bitterness. Please do not forget about God, because He is the *real* author. He is the one who is saying "everything is vanity." He said it through Solomon. He inspired Solomon to write these things down as a result of his experiences with life. But the real author saying that "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" is God.

What we have here in the book of Ecclesiastes is a classic exposé on many, many aspects of life that we seem determined to pay a great deal of attention to. There is a great deal of leaven buried within the body of this huge subject.

The most dangerous aspect of vanity is that it drives us towards idolatry and the way that vanity may be expressed. It is expressed differently from one person to another. It is not always expressed in exactly the same way, but the same thing, the same impulse, the same motive, is driving everything. But by the way it is expressed, it may indeed be an idol.

The difficult aspect of vanity is that it is in large measure an attitude that produces not only an external action, but at the same time a very powerful state of denial. Do you know what denial is? That is when we have a problem that impacts, sometimes very negatively, on others as well as on the self that virtually everybody else can clearly see, but we deny to ourselves and others that we have it.

We will claim: "It's no problem. I can handle it." "It doesn't bother me or anybody else." "It's not hurting anybody." I do not know how many alcoholics I have counseled who have said that. Meanwhile their family was being torn up. Everybody was virtually pulling out their hair in frustration at the way this person was acting, and yet this person was in a powerful state of denying that there was any problem at all. "I can handle it." "I'm not having any wrecks." "I'm not staggering all over the street." "I'm hanging on to my job, bringing home the money." Vanity does that to a person. It drives a person into a sin, and at the same time produces a state of denial.

In Proverbs 16 is the Bible's equivalent of a statement you might say on denial.

Proverbs 16:2 All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weighs the spirits.

Let me give you that in a couple of other translations.

Moffatt translation: "A man's ways seem all right to him; but the Eternal has the verdict on his life."

The Jerusalem Bible: "A man's conduct may strike him as pure; Yahweh, however, weighs the motives."

If a man thinks he is clean, then why does God say in His testimony that we, in our best state, are altogether vanity? I would have to say that God sees man in denial. Look how hard it is for God to get us to repent, to get us to admit that we have a sin, to get us to admit that we have a nature that is at enmity against Him. I am not just talking about us here; I am talking about mankind in general. God sees man in a state of denial, and do you know what? Denial itself is a vanity that is visible to anyone who has the discernment to see it.

The Bible divides its instruction on vanity into two major areas. It is interesting that the instruction is fairly neatly divided between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each one pretty much accomplishes or focuses on one particular aspect of it. The Old Testament provides the majority of instruction on the broadest area of vanity, and that is what Solomon tackles in the book of Ecclesiastes. He is not the only one who tackled it, but he tackled it in the most detail, and that is in the area of transitoriness—the worthless nature of human life and culture.

We are going to turn now to Psalm 90. As far as we know, this is the only psalm of Moses in the Bible. He wrote a couple of songs, and one of them is pretty important there in the book of Deuteronomy, but this is the only one that appears in the book of Psalms. The word *vanity* incidentally does not appear in this psalm, but yet it is a psalm about vanity.

Psalm 90:1-7 LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man to destruction; and say, Return, you children of men. For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. You carry them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep, in the morning they are like grass which grows up. In the morning it flourishes, and grows up; in the evening it is cut down, and withered. For we are consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath are we terrified.

The Old Testament approaches vanity as an overall reason, goal, way, purpose, or end for which life is lived. Why is man living? What is he going toward?

Moses had a peculiar insight into things by virtue of the position God chose him for and put him in. The way he begins this psalm is to compare the eternity of God with the brevity of man. Four comparisons are made in order to draw our attention to this. Man's life is but a vapor. Poof! Here today and gone tomorrow! What good is it? That is what he is asking. What can you accomplish in seventy years? Why were we born?

By comparison to God, Moses said, "A thousand years in His sight is but as yesterday." How much is seventy years compared to a thousand years? Seventy years is the "blink of an eye" compared to God. Then he goes on in the same verse to say, "As the watch in the night. . ." Do you know how long a watch was? Three hours. Now that is a "blink of an eye" in comparison to God. He goes on, "You carry them [mankind] away as with a flood." Man is like a particle carried by a huge flood waters. Poof! Gone! Then in verse 6 he compares us to grass. In the morning it flourishes and grows up, and in the evening it is cut down and withered. Only one day there.

Think about Moses. I mentioned his position. What did he see in his lifetime? He was at the very pinnacle of power. Maybe he was just about ready to become the Pharaoh of Egypt at the age of 40 in all of the strength and energy of his youth, after accomplishing a great deal. History said that he was a general, that he headed up armies and conquered other lands.

Moses was raised in Pharaoh's house. He was schooled in all the wisdom of Egypt. God plucked him out of there and made him a shepherd for 40 years tending sheep. You talk about going from the top to the bottom.

You might say that as an orphan Moses went from the bottom right to the very top into Pharaoh's house where he received all that education. And then when it is just within his grasp, it gets jerked out away from him, and he finds himself tending sheep. There were 40 years of humbling, but it was not over yet. God brought him back to Egypt, and he became the instrument through which God warned Egypt. He witnessed against Egypt as to what they were doing, and what God was about to do.

He witnessed to the greatest nation on the face of the earth at that time being devastated by the power of God. It took the Egyptians thousands of years to get into that position of greatness. God wiped it away in practically the blink of an eye. They have never, never recovered. The monuments are there, but God, by His testimony, says that they are the basest of nations.

Moses also witnessed the children of Israel freed from their captivity without even having to make a revolution. They walked out with a high hand, carrying with them great amounts of the wealth of the nation that kept them in captivity for quite a period of time and owed them the money anyway.

They get out into the wilderness and God feeds them for 40 years. Because of a relationship with God, this nation Israel had within its grasp to be the greatest nation on the face of the earth, and they blew it! Moses saw a whole generation blow away the greatest opportunity maybe that a nation has ever had to become great, powerful, and influential. They blew it because they did not believe because of their lack of faith, and they died. You can see Moses reflecting on this: Why are we here? Life gets blown away, but God goes on. So Moses witnessed that. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon said the earth abides forever, and where is man?

Psalm 90:13 Return, O LORD, how long? And have compassion on Your servants.

Moses interceding said, "God, change your mind. Help us."

Psalm 90:14-17 O satisfy us early with your mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days where You have afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let Your work appear to Your servants, and Your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us and You establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands.

Do you know what he said at the end of that? He said, "God, change your mind. Give us another chance!" Well, God did not give them another chance, but He did carry through with His purpose and gave Israel the land. Maybe those people will be in the second resurrection, but Moses, reflecting on that, was inspired of God to write this down so that we would understand at least an introductory basis for this subject. That is basically what the Old Testament covers. It covers that area of vanity.

The New Testament, though, very clearly shows that is most definitely not all there is to vanity. The New Testament both expands on the subject, and narrows it as well. It expands it spiritually, and narrows down into what is important to us in regard to the Kingdom of God. The New Testament directs us to conceit and vain glory. We will spend more time next week on the New Testament, but for now we will reflect back again on the Old Testament.

The Old Testament's approach to vanity is one that people frequently sense, or even fear, because of the state of their lives. I am talking about the unconverted. It takes the Spirit of God to give an authoritative answer to the questions that arise in peoples' minds. Many people have asked this question and thought about what David wrote here.

Psalm 39:4-6 LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths; and my

age is as nothing before You, every man is at his best state but vapor. Surely every man walks about like a shadow, surely they busy themselves in vain, he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them.

Man has accomplished many things in science, education, government, religion, social planning, athletics, and arts. Despite all of this and all of our schemes to make a better world, to rid it of disease, build huge magnificent construction projects, create beauty out of wilderness, harness nature and make the laws of God work in man's behalf, God says that at our best state we are vanity. Man is but a breath, transitory, empty. That is pretty humbling, yet we think of ourselves as being important.

I think I mentioned this in a sermon before, but I think that it is worth repeating. I can recall visiting a lady a number of times who was in a convalescent hospital in Bellflower, California back in the early seventies. She most definitely did not represent man at his best state, but I think that at least for me she did represent how futile life can be. Her limbs were contorted by arthritis. Her hands were permanently formed into nothing more than claws. By the time she died her legs were amputated because she also had diabetes. When she was buried she was nothing but a torso. I preached her funeral sermon at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Cerritos, and only one other person besides me and Gerald Flurry showed up at that poor soul's end.

How about the death of Mozart? If any of you saw the movie "Amadeus," they gave a reasonably good picture of a man so gifted in music that music poured out of him in a torrent. So what did he die as? I do not know. At the age of 35 he was a burned out hulk. His body was wrapped in burlap or some kind of cloth, and was unceremoniously buried (dumped) into nothing more than a pauper's grave. Nobody knows for sure even where his remains are, yet his music is a lasting centuries-long monument to the genius of his skill in this area.

Now consider this for a vain life. Jesus said of Judas that it would have been better for him not to even have been born! That is quite a testimony. I wonder about this lady that I visited in the hospital. Why did her life have to end in such a pitiful state? Yet as bad as she was, was she really any worse off than others that we might think of as being the very best of us who are also nothing but vanity?

Psalms 39, in its overall sense, is not a protest at all. David wrote this. It is the sincere questioning of a godly man who did not fully understand what he was going through, and yet he did have supreme faith in God. He could see that man's life is short and is filled with a tremendous number of uncertainties, and that there was very little that he could control. He was the king! He could clearly see that mankind was spending its time, as we would say today, spinning its wheels, chasing unreality, and he did not want to end his life doing that. He could see there was a great insufficiency in mankind, and he was appealing to God to make up for it in him.

It is interesting that this word *hebel* can actually be translated as a phantom. It apparently appears this way in ancient Hebrew writings. Man is at his best state a phantom—like an apparition. No substance to him. Not a reality.

Ecclesiastes 1:13-15 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. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, indeed, all is vanity and grasping for wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.

The idea here is that life as Solomon viewed it has a frustrating, "grasping for" quality to it. Do you know what? You cannot catch the wind. It is insubstantial. There is nothing to hold on to. We can reach and come away with nothing. That is what Solomon is saying here. He is saying that mankind is striving. He is saying that mankind is trying to do things, but the realities and things that will be lasting and worthwhile always escape him. Solomon could see that there is a disorder of things that needs to be corrected in society in order to make life better, but he is unable to make the corrections.

Again we have here the testimony of one of the most powerful rulers who ever lived. We think *we* have problems. From his position at the top of the country, he undoubtedly had advisors and counselors from various areas of the nation of Israel telling him about this problem and that problem and this project and that project. They were probably telling him of things going on outside the borders, and what was going on inside the borders, that there were insurrections brewing here.

The streets needed to be paved. The sewage projects needed to go on. Water was needed over here, and on and on it goes. He could see disorder and confusion. Always the problems were outrunning the ability to meet them. That is why he said, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight." No matter what kind of social program they came up with, it never was the complete answer to the problem. Even Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you." There is no such thing, at least under circumstances as they are today in this world, to get rid of the social problems. Man is too perverse for that kind of thing to occur.

Ecclesiastes 2:1 I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure; but surely, this also is vanity. . . .

Ecclesiastes 2:11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do, and, behold, all was vanity and grasping of wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

So Solomon's experiences with riches and the enjoyment that riches can buy produced the same result. There is an easy tendency to think that if we just had a little bit more money, the major problems we have would go away. But they will not. Do you know why? The answer is simple. The problem is in *us!*

Solomon—probably the richest man who ever lived—leaves us a record that all the enjoyments that riches can buy are not the answer to this problem of worthlessness and uselessness. So money cannot do it, and neither can involvement and completion of projects that we are involved in.

Please understand, Solomon is not saying that we should avoid these things, because accomplishing things is necessary to what God is doing. We are "to dress and to keep." We are to understand that these things, of and by themselves, are not the answer. They are part of the solution. They are needful to accomplishing the solution, but they are not the solution in themselves.

I do not think that there is any more clear example of this than Herbert Armstrong. I think God used him very mightily at this end-time to build up the work of God, to strengthen the church of God, to reveal truth that had been lost to the church of God, and through him the church was built up to over a hundred thousand strong.

Mr. Armstrong died, and in the intervening ten years his name has become vilified, and people are running it into the ground like he was one of the greatest sinners who ever lived. Mr. Armstrong

himself recounted in his autobiography of great men—bankers, publishers, and so forth—that he knew. A few years after they died, he would see their pictures hanging in the bank or whatever, and he would ask the employees, "Who was that?" They would not even know. It was the man who founded the bank in which they were working.

There is nothing wrong with big projects and things that we accomplish, but do not look to them to be the answer to this problem of vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16 And I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do that succeeds the king?—only what he has already done. Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all. So said I in my heart, "What happens to the fool, it also happens even to me; and why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity." For there is no more remembrance of the wise [remember the bankers] than of the fool forever, since all that now is in the days will be forgotten in the days to come. And how dies a wise man? As the fool!

We are all on a track or a course to increase our knowledge of God. Even that can be a vanity. "Knowledge puffs up," Paul said, "but love builds up." So even the accumulation of knowledge is essential to finding the answer to vanity and conquering it. Even *it* can become a vanity if we are not careful. It can become useless, meaningless, profitless, and futile.

The wisest man who ever lived had to discover a very frustrating thing, and that is that wisdom cannot be passed from person to person. He could not pass it to his children. So what is the reality there? Everybody has to get it for themselves. As wise as Solomon was, he found it frustrating that he was going to have to leave what he labored to and for to someone who would not appreciate it: his children.

Now how often have you seen this principle lived out in our lifetimes where maybe some man or woman, through the dint of their hard work and their intelligence, accumulated a great deal of wealth? Then they leave that wealth to their heirs, and the heirs run through it like it is just so much water. That principle bothered Solomon.

Ecclesiastes 11:10 Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh; for childhood and youth are vanity.

I think we can all attest to one aspect of this verse, and that is that time rushes by so swiftly. When you look back from your present age to childhood, it almost seems like there is little more than a blink of an eye. Ladies, think about when your babies were born. Now you might even be a grandparent. It looks like that time went by so fast. At least one of the things Solomon is saying here is that childhood and youth seem to be exceedingly transitory. They vanish so quickly, and they come to nothing. All that energy and all that beauty of youth is just so soon gone.

How many of us have done things in our youth that we later came to regret? Well, this verse is a warning against allowing the fleeting character of childhood and youth to zip by while doing things that are later going to cause remorse and pain. That is the advice to young people.

Proverbs 31:30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is passing; but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

This verse is a warning that charm and beauty may not be what they seem to be, that charm may be nothing more than an acquired public relations skill that is used to manipulate. It can be nothing more than a physical discipline. Beauty is vain. It is transitory, because man's perception of beauty is different from culture to culture. Even that beauty changes because we age. We sometimes get sick, or we might have an accident, or the culture's perception of beauty changes.

The fashion industry takes mighty good care of that one. It keeps manipulating and tweaking peoples' perception of beauty so that they can continue to sell something that will keep us in style. When beauty fades, where are we?

It is very interesting that the book of Proverbs begins by addressing young men. "My son, listen to my words." Very shortly, within seven verses, he says that what matters in life is "fearing the LORD." We just saw something very interesting. The book ends by addressing women, that what matters is "the fear of the LORD." Just as surely as Ecclesiastes begins with "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" and ends with vanity being associated in the same way, so the book of Proverbs begins by telling young men to fear God, and it ends by telling young women to fear God. Now is there a message in the midst of all this instruction regarding vanity?

As we continue to lay the groundwork here, let us go to Psalm.

Psalm 62:9 Surely men of low degree are a vapor, men of high degree are a lie; if they are laid on the scales, they are altogether lighter than vapor.

Now vanity of course appears there twice. It is the same word *hebel* that we have been dealing with in most of the other verses. The overall intent of this psalm is to teach us to trust God. It is interesting that this verse is saying that common men may be willing to help, but they have no ability to help. On the other hand, "rich" is being used in the sense of them being people of power, people of leadership. People in leadership positions are powerful. When you want to get something done, is it not usually best to go to the most powerful person you think can give you some help? This is what this is addressing.

A common man may be willing to help you out of your problem, but unable to do so because he is not in a position to do so. We turn to those who are powerful, who are wealthy. What does God say about them? They are as good as useless too! They are a lie. You have to come to trust God to really get things done. God is saying that the wealthy and powerful promise much, but perform little.

Often times you will find that the people in these positions help themselves to what you sought their help for. Want a good example? How about lawyers? They have power. They have influence. They know the law. You go to them because you have a lawsuit against somebody. You get a big settlement, and they take anywhere to one-third to forty percent, or maybe fifty percent of it.

You are the one who was hurt. You are the one who was injured. God is saying that their help, even when it comes, is very costly, and said they cause you to hope, but actually mock your expectations. So what good are they? They are a vanity.

We are going to look at Psalm 94. I am giving this so we get a broad perspective of this subject and begin to see that God approaches it very frequently, especially as it is shown in the Old Testament. It is a huge subject.

Psalm 94:8-11 Understand, you senseless among the people; and you fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? He who instructs the nations, shall not He correct? He who teaches man knowledge, shall not He know? The LORD knows the thoughts of man, that they are futile.

Since action follows thought, then it follows that man's conduct is also included in the correction that is given here. That is, man's actions are vain just as surely as his thoughts. The idea in this context is that those being addressed were conducting their lives in a vain fashion for quite a while. So the psalmist says this: "Do you think that He who made the ear does not have ears of His own to hear what you are saying?" Have we ever thought foolishly, vainly, that we can get away with it? That is the issue here.

There is nothing said in the dark that God cannot hear. There is nothing said in secret that God cannot hear. God even reads our thoughts. So you see, nothing can be hidden from Him. That is the concept here. "For He who made the eye, does He not have eyes to see what we are doing?"

Do not think that you are getting away with this punishment because it has not come yet. I am still thinking about the psalm here, because that is what the psalmist is implying. The psalmist is saying, "Do you think vainly that because God has seemingly not punished you that you are going to get away with it?" The psalmist is saying that you are foolish to think in that manner because God does not think and see as men do.

He says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and My words are not your words. For as heaven is higher above the earth, so are My thoughts higher than your thoughts." See, God does not think as a man thinks. Man vainly thinks that God thinks like a man, and because the punishment does not come right away that somehow or other God does not see it.

To us, the warning is this: We see people we may consider to be people of power, or charisma, or persuasion, and they are living lives we know are a lie. They are hypocrites. In many cases maybe they are so bold in their approach to life and their approach to sin that they seem to get away with it. Well, the psalmist is saying, "God sees these people stripped of all their wealth, of all their charisma, of their powerful position."

Remember Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, "That because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." It is vain. But people foolishly think that God does not care. They think that He is looking the other way, or that He is overlooking, that He is like an indulgent grandparent and has not intervened because He loves them so much. Well those are vain thoughts. God does mercifully instruct His people in what He expects before the ax falls. "The LORD God will do nothing except He reveal His secret to His servant the prophet."

Let us leave the Old Testament and go back to that one in Romans where the word vanity appeared.

Romans 8:19-20 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.

Here we have another all-encompassing statement. This verse actually intensifies the things we were seeing there in the Old Testament, and at the same time it begins to shift the focus of vanity into a somewhat different area. In this case Paul personifies the whole creation as though it were alive like a human being, and able to have feelings.

He personifies the entire creation as though it is suffering from frustration, futility, and decay, depending upon which translation you are reading. But it does not leave us there, because the creation is also looking forward in eager expectation to the time when it will be released from what is here termed as bondage.

Remember I said that there is much leaven in this subject. Israel was brought out of their bondage. It is a type of our being brought out of *our* bondage. Vanity is a huge bondage that keeps us from fulfilling the purpose God wants out of our lives. The sense here also includes much of what the Old Testament shows in this, in that there is a large measure of disappointment over the character of this present existence.

I think that you will have to agree with that if you will just see the way Solomon looked at it, the way David looked at it, and the way Moses looked at it. There was a sense of frustration in what they voiced because man's life seems to be so futile. That is intensified here with the whole creation expressing a measure of disappointment over the character of its present state because it nowhere reaches the perfection of which it is capable. Paul is showing it feels as though it is frustrated because it is being held back, that it too, like mankind, has a sense of futility in that he is not doing all that he is capable of doing.

We are beginning to see here that the creation cannot be released from its bondage until man is ready. Man, you see, is part of nature. We can understand from these verses then that the redemption of nature is inextricably linked to the total redemption of man, and even as there is a transformation of man ahead, so also is there a transformation of nature to what God intends it be.

We are beginning to see a bit of a shift here. There is an end to the way things are now, but God has willed that we must live, overcome, serve, and grow in the midst of transition, futility, decay, and the frustration it brings. This includes all the emptiness, worthlessness, frustration, and futility man is guilty of bringing into the scheme of things.

Do you not yearn for a pure happier world? So does the creation, as Paul is showing here. Do you not desire that mankind be free from the temptations and the wearisome toils of life? Do you not, like the creation, sigh for deliverance?

God has not fully informed us as to *why* He has willed this condition to exist. Please do not let this slip from your mind. Things are the way they are by the arrangement of the Sovereign Creator God. If He has willed it so, then the way it is will produce more and greater and better than any other way, because God does not make mistakes.

He has *willed* that we must meet life in the face of all this futility and overcome it. In fact He says, "Redeem the time. Make the most use of it, because it is the best training for the Kingdom of God that I could ever give you."

We are going to go back to the book of Ecclesiastes. I am just going to pick up the story thread, and you will find that we do not have to complete even three chapters before Solomon gives us a major clue as to why the Bible views all of human energies as vanity, and therefore essentially profitless.

Solomon was unusually gifted. He had a faculty of getting to the very heart of the matter and perceiving its essentials, so he analyzed the purpose of life. He wanted a sense of well-being. He wanted to understand what would produce this sense of well-being, and so he began by observing the cyclical nature of life. He observed this cycle consisted of unending patterns endlessly repeated, and so he said this is useless. He essentially said that life keeps going in a circle.

Then in one area of life after another he experimented like a pathologist searching for clues in a body, and he systematically evaluated what they produced. In each case he found that none of them could consistently account for what life is about, or produced endlessly favorably results. But in chapter 3 he reaches a significant conclusion in one of the great statements in all of the Bible about mankind.

Ecclesiastes 3:10-11 I have seen the God-given task which with the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

The verse says that God has put eternity in our hearts—that there is an intense yearning to understand beyond what God has already revealed, "and yet (as the *New International Version* translated it) they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

Man is able to perceive that there are duties that must be done, and when we do them right at the right time it produces a beautiful sense of fulfillment. But yet he still cannot see the whole of the reason of things, and that is because God has revealed an overview of His will to only a very few people. In very simple language Solomon is saying mankind does not know what God is doing.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.

It must be revealed!

Ecclesiastes 9:1-2 For I considered all this in my heart, so I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred by what they see before them. All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices, and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath as he who fears an oath.

Mankind can see pieces of the mystery, but not the whole. What this produces in the mind of anyone who is thinking of more than the next moment's amusement is an anxiety about what is going on. This is one of the reasons why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, cautions God's children about taking no anxious thought about tomorrow.

What did we read in Psalm 62 and also in Psalm 69? The psalms are there to teach us to trust God. The fact that man does not know the mystery, this anxiety also has a very powerful tendency to make man put all of his energies into the achievement of carnal goals. Because "beyond the grave" is an unfathomable mystery, his hopes, his drives, and energies are all given over to personal amusement and fulfillment in this world, and because this world is not God's world, those achievements are vanity. Thus a man as wise as Solomon can see, at least carnally, that mankind is going nowhere. That is what vanity is. It is nothingness, emptiness, profitless.

The only people who have a glimmer of where man's life is headed are those to whom God, in His mercy, has revealed the mystery of life—that we were born to be God. God has put eternity in our heart, but mankind does not know why yet. He can only yearn for it, and until he yearns for it his life is going to be filled with futility. Now we are beginning to see the revelation of why vanity is such an important subject when we get to the New Testament.

With that foundation, with God being willing, we will spring from that to the New Testament approach to vanity on the next holy day.