

The Vanity and Reality of Life

- 1 What profit all the labor here?
There's nothing new for you and me!
Remember not the former things;
They're all vanity!

Vanity! Vanity!
Vanity! Vanity!
'Tis chasing the wind;
It's all vanity!
- 2 Man's life is full of grief and pain:
Much wisdom bringeth misery!
Increasing knowledge addeth woe!
It's all vanity!
- 3 What good our pleasure and our wealth?
Though joys we have and family,
We'll have our worries just the same!
It's all vanity!
- 4 Days of toil to gain and restless nights:
Though gained without calamity,
When death comes, it is gone for aye!
It's all vanity!
- 5 Remember God in days of youth!
Fear Him, and such will be your gain!
With Him you will be satisfied,
For He is not vain!

Christ without, all is vain!
Christ within, all is gain!
All things are vain;
Christ only is gain! (*Hymns*, #1080)

Based on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes written by Solomon, Witness Lee wrote this hymn as a simple gospel song depicting the meaninglessness of a human life without Christ. A life without Christ is a life of vanity and emptiness, distracting us from the life that is really life, the life of God in Christ, which has been made available through the Spirit. The theme and content of the hymn, as summarized in the second chorus, is uncomplicated and straightforward: "Christ without, all is vain! / Christ within, all is gain! / All things are vain; / Christ only is gain!" According to the revelation in the Bible, without a living relationship with God through and in the Lord Jesus Christ, human life is an empty shell whose activities are all vanity, a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes

Perhaps it was the dissatisfying end to the pursuit of the things in this world that provoked Solomon to write Ecclesiastes. The title of the book is a Greek word designating a person who is addressing an assembly—hence, a preacher. The text consists of a series of reflections on the vanity of human life and human pursuits apart from God but is, however, interspersed with admonitions that the reader would receive and enjoy all the provisions proceeding from the gracious hand of God with a view that there is a coming judgment of God. Solomon ascended to the throne of Israel following the death of his father, David. Solomon was reputed to be the wisest person of his time. On one hand, he may be considered a very thoughtful, moral, and spiritual person, as evidenced by his building of the temple in Jerusalem and by his writing of several books that are included in the Old Testament; on the other hand, he evidenced a hedonistic nature—he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and confessed that he withheld nothing from himself that would give him pleasure. Solomon possessed both the disposition, time, energy, and wealth to explore and partake of all that human life has to offer. According to this book, his adventures exposed that human life without God is a succession of vaporous activities that mean nothing. Based upon the experiences of his many pursuits, he concludes,

I became great and increased more than all who had been before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I did not keep my heart from any pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my labor, and this was my portion from all my labor. Then I turned to all the works that my hands had done and the labor by which I had labored in doing them, and indeed, all was vanity and a chasing after wind; and there was no advantage under the sun. (2:9-11)

Solomon, however, did not presume that his life was completely without purpose. He realized that God created humanity with "eternity in their heart" (3:11), that is,

an aspiration for something eternal...so that man will seek God, the eternal One. Hence, temporal things can never

satisfy man; only the eternal God, who is Christ, can satisfy the deep sense of purpose in man's heart. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 11, note 1)

Vanity and Reality

Although this hymn is based on the thoughts and expressions of the book of Ecclesiastes, it is written in the light of the revelation of the entire Bible; hence, it uses a black background to highlight and draw full attention to the God-man, Jesus Christ, as the source and meaning of human life. In proclaiming the purpose of our human life, the hymn intimates that we need desperately to change the focus and goal of all our actions, energy, and strength. According to the proclamation of the New Testament, our enjoyment of God as our life, living, and everything is uniquely available in the Son:

This is the testimony, that God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:11-13)

“What Profit All the Labor Here?”

Stanza 1 of the hymn, like the first eleven verses of Ecclesiastes, introduces the universal question of the ages concerning the advantage gained by all our labor on the earth: “What profit all the labor here?” *Labor* in this instance embodies the efforts and accomplishments of a lifetime. Solomon asks what advantage is gained in all our work, and he answers that all things are wearisome (1:3, 8). Solomon seems to be challenging his readers to honestly and sincerely consider what the real meaning of human existence is. His short answer is that human experience without God is vain, meaningless, and empty.

Isaiah 55:2-3 urges us to be cautious to not labor for mere physical rewards but, rather, that we would seek the eternal covenant that God offers. Hundreds of years after Isaiah's admonition, the Lord Jesus counseled the people: “Work not for the food which perishes, but for the food which abides unto eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you; for Him has the Father, even God, sealed” (John 6:27). Solomon's quest for purpose arose out of the anguished, desperate cry of a suffering and distressed person who knows that God has a hidden mystery related to His purpose for humanity. Our human existence is a mystery that we cannot comprehend apart from God's revelation. When we as believers contemplate these great matters, we need to be reminded of God's great kindness and tender mercy in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to us. Solomon comes to the conclusion that there is a hidden purpose for our existence, but

that purpose is not met with outward matters related to prosperity, wealth, health, or success. Neither is it satisfied by family, entertainment, philosophy, or religion. Nothing outward can quiet the uneasy insistence of the sense of purpose that abides in the depths of our being. “He has made everything beautiful in its own time; also He has put eternity in their heart, yet so that man does not find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11).

Solomon concludes that we should enjoy the preciousness of God's provision with a heart of thanksgiving—it is the gift of God—and that we should enjoy those provisions from our youth, because the day is coming when we will experience the inexorable expiration of our life. Solomon did not find an objective answer to his search, because this answer requires the entire Bible to unveil the mystery that was, during Solomon's time, still hidden in God (Eph. 3:9). Nevertheless, Solomon touched to some degree the subjective experience of resting his head on the bosom of the Father, the God of all comfort and consolation, which enabled him to conclude that all things are in His sovereign hands.

“Much Wisdom Bringeth Misery! Increasing Knowledge Addeth Woe!”

Stanza 2 of the hymn alludes to Solomon's detailed search to find meaning through wisdom and knowledge. Most human beings are conscious of the fact that they exist in a state of anxiety and confusion. Life, as they know it, is filled with a temporary purpose at best, a purpose that becomes meaningless even if it is achieved. Solomon describes this condition: “All a man's labor is for his mouth, and yet his appetite is not filled” (Eccl. 6:7). Everything, as viewed from the perspective of the brief existence of a human being on this earth, is empty, vain, and, hence, foolish to pursue. So we often turn to wisdom and knowledge, in search of a deeper meaning. Wisdom is related to philosophy, and knowledge is related to science. Both wisdom and knowledge in this context are exercised apart from God. There is a groping for some hidden key that may unlock the meaning of human life and the way for humanity to exist, survive, and prosper. Solomon set his “heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens” (1:13). But he found that both wisdom and knowledge failed his expectations: “I perceived that this also is a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (vv. 17-18).

In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks very clearly about human efforts to find wisdom, that is, something of interest, something of knowledge that satisfies:

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the

disputer of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know God, God was well pleased through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe. (1:20-21)

Knowledge brings in misery because we are robbed and deceived by our human knowledge; we are seduced away from the God who loves us and from the Christ to whom we are espoused (2 Cor. 11:3). Eve was seduced from an intimate relationship with God through the serpent's subtle suggestions. The abundance of fallen human wisdom and knowledge only increases misery and adds to our woes. The corrupting thoughts within and outside of us must be confronted, rejected, and utterly overturned in Christ. Only then will we be qualified and ready to speak the wisdom of God.

“What Good Our Pleasure and Our Wealth? Though Joys We Have and Family”

Stanza 3 of the hymn asserts that despite every human desire or institution that we seek as a source of comfort and purpose, a life without God in Christ is unmitigated vanity. Human beings without God live meaningless lives, utterly opposed to truth. The hymn asks, “What good our pleasure and our wealth? / Though joys we have and family, / We'll have our worries just the same!”

“When Death Comes, It Is Gone for Aye!”

Stanza 4 of the hymn returns to the thought of toil for gain and restless nights of anxiety. Even if there is gain without calamity, that is, a relatively calm and comfortably profitable living, it will all be gone just the same when death comes. In chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reflects on the fate of the fool and the fate of the wise man; he construes that they both meet the same end: “Of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no remembrance forever, seeing that in the days to come all will be forgotten. And how the wise man dies just like the fool!” (v. 16). And what about all that a wise man has gained from his skillful labor? It will go to one who has not labored: “There is a man whose labor has been with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill, and to a man who has not labored on it he gives it as his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil” (v. 21).

“Remember God!”

To ecclesiastes, the preacher, it is a great vanity to live for this present age, which is so quickly over. Whatever we do means nothing; it is vanity. Whatever we are is fleeting and transitory, a chasing after wind. Yet it is equally vain to merely endure this age without enjoying what we now have from the hand of God.

The preacher's instruction is that we must change our focus, not focusing on what we can do or how much we can gain as the result of our effort and even not focusing on whether we are wise or foolish but, instead, turning our eyes to the One who is. The key is “Remember God!” (cf. 12:1). He is our source, our motivation, our hope, our expectation, and our desire. Fear Him; that is, be deeply cognizant of Him at all times—He is our unique reason for being. He created us not for this world but for Himself. For our entire life on this earth we should do all things unto Him, giving thanks to Him in all things. Stanza 5 concludes, “With Him you will be satisfied, / For He is not vain!” We do not need to abandon all labor, but we must realize that it is a temporary gift from God to be received and enjoyed in Him. Are we just engaged in days of toil and restless nights? In everything we should remember God.

Forgetting God is the greatest sin, the source of all sin in the universe. The Lord Jesus prophesied concerning the Holy Spirit: “When He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and concerning righteousness and concerning judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe into Me” (John 16:8-9). The Holy Spirit brings the reality of the Lord Jesus directly into our lives in this world. The first item of His work is that He convicts the world concerning sin. This sin is the sin of not believing into Him. It is not because they do evil, not because they fail to do good, not because they are or are not engaged in philosophy, science, agriculture, education, government, economic oversight, international relations, peace movements, and religious efforts and practices, that men are constituted sinners; it is because they do not believe into Christ.

“Christ Only Is Gain!”

The concluding chorus of the hymn states, “Christ without, all is vain!” Whatever we are, whatever we do, whatever we think, whatever we speak, write, or propagate without Christ as the center (not as a philosophy or a religion but as the intimate, living reality of all that we do and say) is vanity—“Christ within, all is gain! / All things are vain; / Christ only is gain!” John boldly writes, “He who has the Son has the life” (1 John 5:12). This life is the only life, the real life, the divine life, the eternal life, the enjoyable life, the life that prepares us for and gives us a rich and bountiful entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:11).

God has put eternity in our hearts. There is a deep longing within every human being, a sense of purpose that repeatedly demands our attentiveness. This true purpose of humanity is stirred within us as a deeper consciousness when God is dispensed into us as the Spirit, freeing us

from the ignorance and emptiness of an earthbound existence without God and enabling us to fully comprehend our relationship to God, to ourselves, and to creation.

The Christ who is gain is the Christ who is all and in all the believers, as spoken of in Colossians 3:10-11—the Christ in us who is our hope of glory (1:27). This Christ matches the eternity in our hearts, and we are mingled in spirit with Him as the essence of that eternity. In this divine-human mingling, we freely give over what we are and what we have to our Father God, and He, in turn, freely fills us with all the fullness of His goodness, perfection, and reality; that is, He

pours Himself as the Spirit into our very being and thus becomes the essence of our being. We live because He lives, and we become one mingled entity, a mysterious and mystical divine-human organism of the life that is really life (1 Tim. 6:19).

by Gary Kaiser

Works Cited

Hymns. Living Stream Ministry, 2018.

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible, Living Stream Ministry, 2003.

The Position of Ecclesiastes in the Books of Poetry

The fourth book of poetry, Ecclesiastes, is a continuation of Proverbs in both style and spiritual significance. Proverbs presents the way of human conduct in the experiences of God's holy people; Ecclesiastes continues, speaking of the realization of the matters and things of human life in the experiences of God's holy people. Proverbs emphasizes the matter of the holy people's human conduct, whereas Ecclesiastes emphasizes the holy people's realization of the matters and things of human life. The holy people's way of human conduct comes from God's wisdom, and their realization of the matters and things of human life also comes from God's wisdom. They had a definite realization concerning the matters and things of human life because they conducted themselves according to God's wisdom. Therefore, this realization was also part of the wisdom they received from God.

The first book of poetry, Job, speaks of the significance of the experiences of God's holy people; the second book, Psalms, speaks of the holy people's sentiments and feelings in their experiences; the third book, Proverbs, speaks of the holy people's way of human conduct in their experiences; and the fourth book, Ecclesiastes, speaks of the holy people's realization of the matters and things of human life in their experiences. These books follow one another, and even a slight rearrangement of their sequence would cause a disruption in the flow. The holy people's realization of the matters and things of human life comes from their experience of human conduct as spoken of in Proverbs. Therefore, it is very fitting that Ecclesiastes follows Proverbs...

Psalms speaks of God's desire for the holy people to turn from the law to Christ. Ecclesiastes speaks of the holy people's realization of the matters and things of human life from their experiences; such a realization caused them to discard these matters and things in order to pursue God Himself, which is to pursue Christ. God's holy people initially considered the law as profitable; later, they received revelation and realized that Christ is everything. This is the situation at the end of Psalms. Then they realized the vanity of the matters and things of human life, and thus they were willing to suffer "the loss of all things" in order to gain God Himself, that is, to gain Christ (Phil. 3:8). This is the situation at the end of Ecclesiastes, and it is also what Paul speaks of in Philippians 3:6-8.

In the holy people's experiences, they abandoned the pursuit of the law in Psalms, and then they discarded all things in Ecclesiastes. At the beginning they did not understand that God wanted them to abandon their pursuit of the law, but eventually the Holy Spirit led them to turn from the law to Christ. Subsequently, the Holy Spirit caused them to see the vanity of all matters and things of human life so that they were willing to discard them all. This is the experience spoken of in Ecclesiastes. The experiences in both Psalms and Ecclesiastes were for the holy people to gain Christ. After that, the holy people were brought to gain Christ completely in Song of Songs, to reach the stage of maturity, and to enter into the Lord's inward parts and thus work together with Him.

This sequence matches our experience. After we are saved, we are pleased to live under the law. Gradually, we come to know that God desires us to live in Christ, not under the law. Eventually, we realize the vanity of all things, and thus we are willing to count all things other than Christ as refuse so that we may gain Christ.

"Revelations in the Books of Poetry: Seeing the Experiences of God's Holy People" by Witness Lee in *The Collected Works of Witness Lee*, 1956, vol. 1, pp. 537-540