

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2:11 ALL PAIN, NO GAIN?

I checked last week, and it is still the best-selling non-fiction book on the New York Times' list. It is called "The Secret." Here is a sample:

"This is your life, and it's been waiting for you to discover it! Up until now you may have been thinking that life is hard and a struggle, and so by the law of attraction you will have experienced life as hard and a struggle.

"Begin right now to shout to the universe, 'Life is so easy! Life is so good! All good things come to me!'"

I read through "The Secret", and here is the central idea. If I want something, I just have to speak it into existence, and it will be mine.

There is no secret to "The Secret": it's the American gospel of health, wealth and prosperity. Yet while its solution is wrong, this book does speak about something within our hearts.

We want good. We want value. We want meaning. We want to get something out of life!

The book of Ecclesiastes reveals the same longing as we see in this best-selling book. But while "The Secret" pumps us up, Ecclesiastes wears us down, with hard words about this hard world.

The word "Ecclesiastes" is actually a Greek translation of the Hebrew name "Qohelet." That title refers to a person who preaches or teaches - someone who gathers people together to express something.

The book of Ecclesiastes is probably the work of King Solomon, or someone who was close to King Solomon. Yet it is not the secure wisdom of the book of Proverbs. It is a struggle, as the writer expresses his thoughts about life in this world.

The writer expresses THE PAIN of this life, here and through the book. While the author of "The Secret" denies the pain, the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes cannot escape the pain.

What is this pain like? We can sum it up this way: there is the pain of shortness, and the pain of sameness. In chapter 1, the writer expresses THE PAIN OF SHORTNESS.

We read in verse 4, "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever."

Then he uses several illustrations:

* The sun: it rises and sets, and rises and sets, as we come and go.

* The wind: it blows and blows and blows, as we come and go.

* The water: it flows back and forth, as we come and go.

Here we are. The earth was here long before us, and it will be remain, long after we are gone. The pain of shortness.

The writer of Psalm 90 proclaimed, "You return men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.' For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning - though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered."

We are dust. We are like grass. The earth endures, but we do not.

Last spring, when Zack Eswine was here for our Bible Institutes, he said something that led me to think, "Wow! I'm not the only one who has thought that!" He said that when he watches old television shows or movies, he may think, "Those people are dead. They have died."

I do the same thing. Taylor and I have enjoyed watching DVDs of the early M.A.S.H. shows. Some of the early stars of that show have already died. I sometimes sit there and think, "That person is alive as I am seeing him now, but he is really dead."

You might think that is morbid, but it is a reflection of the shortness of life. The writer of Ecclesiastes has had a "good" life by our standards, but even if you have the best things in life, life is so short.

The pain of shortness. Also, THE PAIN OF SAMENESS.

Chapter 1, verse 9: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

What is the pain here? Is it just the pain of routine - the pain we feel when we eat the same cereal 17 days in a row? Is it the pain of boredom - the pain of sitting through the same lecture by your boss?

Maybe. But more is here. This is the pain of knowing that nothing he has described, or will describe, will ever change. The cycle of life and death, then life and death, then life and death, will continue, and nothing will stop it.

There are several ways to look at our lives, and human history.

* One view is chaos. It's all disorder. It's all chance. Nothing makes sense. Your world and our world is a chaotic mess.

* Another view is progress. It's all getting better. Just wait: if we can improve education and technology a little more, we will have heaven on earth.

* But another view is this view: sameness. Even though the details may change, there is nothing new.

What was, is. What is, will be.

It is like exercising on a treadmill. I hate it! I go and go and go, and I don't get anywhere! I see those lights that tell me that I have gone so far, but I don't believe it! I just finish where I started.

But you say, "That was then. Ecclesiastes was written thousands of years ago. We have advanced in medicine and technology."

Yes. But life is still short. The cycle is still the same. We can dream about "leaving the world a better place," but the truth is that the world got along before us, and the world will survive without us, and there is nothing we can do to change it.

It is painful. It is painful to think that we will all die, and we will all die rather soon in the scheme of things, and nothing can be done about it.

What's the point? What's the purpose? Where's the meaning?

Where's...THE GAIN?

The issue of gain is at the heart of the word translated "meaningless." Other translators have translated this word "vanity." The idea is that of futility, and frailness, or something that is insubstantial, like steam coming from a hot drink.

You can take any translation you like, but the issue is captured in verse 3 of chapter 1: "What does man gain...?" In the midst of his pain about all the shortness and sameness of life, the writer of Ecclesiastes seeks gain.

He seeks the gain of thinking, and the gain of feeling.

Will he get THE GAIN OF THINKING? In other words, can he "think" himself to a place where he is not so miserable?

In chapter 1, verse 12, he almost identifies himself as Solomon. He tells us that he has pursued wisdom, and he has grown in wisdom and knowledge.

He has done the philosophy thing. He has thought through different ways of seeing life, and he has tried to find a way of thinking that will allow him to make some sense of his life.

But it did not work. Chapter 1, verse 18: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief." The more he thought on everything, the more sad he became.

It is not just him. Why do people become depressed? We have all sorts of explanations available to us. Some say it is simply a matter of chemicals in our brains. Others say it is a result of our sin. Still others remind us of how this world is filled with terrible events that would depress anybody!

Sickness, sin and sorrow are all contributors to depression. But listen to the words of William Willimon, who is a chaplain at Duke University:

"I think depression can be a sign of intelligence - that you know that God may have created us for more than tech stocks.

"After a sermon where I said something like that, this woman came up to me and said, 'I've been under treatment for depression for twenty years.'

"Immediately I thought she was going to light into me with, 'What do you know about depression?...'

"But she said, 'I've never thought of it like that. I was taught to think of this as an ailment. It may just be that I'm very perceptive.'"

This woman could relate to the writer of Ecclesiastes. Isn't it true? As you open your eyes and mind, and as you really think deeply of the pain of this world, as you immerse your thoughts in the shortness and sameness of life, will you grow happier or get sadder? I think you will get sadder. In the words of one writer, "The more you understand, the more you ache."

This is not a call for us to turn off our brains! But I do want us to see that we cannot "think" our way out of pain. "The Secret" does not help.

We all try to do this, even if we have not studied philosophy. We try to find words to give us gain in the pain. One you sometimes hear is, "Everything will be all right."

Will it? Do you know that? If I lose my job, everything is not all right. If my loved one dies, everything will not be all right. If that disease cannot be stopped from devastating me, everything may not be all right.

The gain of thinking? No.

Then what about THE GAIN OF FEELING?

Chapter 2, verse 1: "I thought in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.'" Is there gain in the good feelings that come with pleasure?

He certainly sought this gain! Listen to the list:

* Laughter. He will live a life of outward happiness. He will take nothing too seriously, but he will find a way to laugh at everything that happens.

* Wine. He will medicate his soul, by what he takes into his body. If he lived today, maybe he could add certain drugs to the list.

* Projects. He will work and work and work. As we would say, he will make something of himself.

* Money. He will amass a lot of wealth, and he will use that wealth to collect a lot of neat stuff.

* Comfort. He will have male and female slaves, who will do whatever he wants them to do. No dishwashing, vacuuming or lawn mowing for him.

* Entertainment. Male and female singers will amuse and amaze him. Think of what entertainment choices he would have today!

* Sex. He has a harem. He has all the women he wants.

Chapter 2, verse 10: "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure..." The gain of feeling.

But did it work? Verse 11: "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

No gain! None of this could remove the pain, and replace it with gain! It felt good for a moment, or even for a while, but still his heart ached.

I am reminded of a woman who was a "spirituality editor" for a well-known publication marketed to women. She said, "I've come to the painful realization that men and shoes are not enough to make me happy."

Men and shoes? No gain.

Laughter? No gain. Wine? No gain. Projects? No gain. Money? No gain. Entertainment? No gain. Comfort? No gain? Sex? No gain.

Maybe a moment of pleasure, but no peace. No joy. No rest. No hope. No satisfaction. No gain.

Why? Why is there no gain in all of this? Two phrases show us.

The first: "I devoted myself." In other words, he gave his heart to this. He gave his heart away, in the hope that what he thought and felt, would give him some sort of "gain."

But it could not, because of this second phrase: "under the sun." All of it is "under the sun." It is part of this world of shortness and sameness, so it can satisfy for only a moment.

The writer of Ecclesiastes has done what we all do. We search for gain, in what will never finally result in gain. We set our hearts upon these things, but sooner or later we will see the meaninglessness of it all, and we will even despair, for in a world of pain, we have given ourselves to things that finally offer no gain.

We know this, because as we pursue these things, we find our desires for them heightened, not lessened. We seek more, and gain less.

Where have you looked for gain? Laughter? Wine? Projects? Money? Comfort? Entertainment? Sex? Something else? It's all the same. It is going to last for so short a time, and it won't remove the pain.

All pain, no gain.

Is there hope? It's hard to see here, isn't it? If you read through the rest of Ecclesiastes, the mood does not lighten!

Where is the answer? Where is the hope? At the end, the writer tells us to fear God. That is the start. But we find the heart of the answer as we think of another king over Jerusalem - one who lived under the sun, but is not limited to living under the sun.

It is Jesus. He was the hope of the faithful, all through the Old Testament. Listen to some of his words from the gospel of John:

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Only in Jesus, is there gain, for he has come to live under the sun, then to die and rise again, so that we might gain life now, and gain life forever.

In his words, "Do you believe this?" Do you believe this so much, that it has seeped into your heart, and into the way you live in this life of pain?

Where is your heart today?

Have you come today, feeling the pain of this world? Can you relate to the cry of the one who felt the shortness and sameness of this life?

Maybe you feel this pain, because you cannot distract yourself from your thoughts about the unstoppable of death.

Maybe you feel this pain, because you have been devastated emotionally by the cruelty of people in your life.

Maybe you feel this pain, because you have become consumed by your consumption of the terrible news that we hear and see each day.

Apart from Jesus, there is no relief from the pain, now or forever. Only in Jesus, there is help in the pain, and hope through the pain.

Have you come today, planning to go back to this world, to gain whatever you can? What thoughts and feelings are you pursuing?

Maybe you think that if you can just have that one relationship, then all will be well.

Maybe you think that if you can just get another chemically-induced or excitement-induced high, then all will be well.

Maybe you think that if you can just achieve the latest in your list of goals, then all will be well.

Apart from Jesus, there is no gain. You can get all you want, but you will have finally gained nothing. Only in Jesus, there is gain.

As we walk through the pain of this gainless life, we must be a people with a passion to seek meaning, value, hope, and gain, through Jesus. Only he gives us gain in what we do today. Only his gain, will last forever.

We must set our hearts and our minds upon him, the lovely source of true delight, as we know him, grow in him, and show him to others.

Thou lovely source of true delight, whom I unseen adore,
Unveil Thy beauty to my sight, that I might love Thee more.