

Articles by C. E. Stuart

C. E. Stuart

Public domain. As published on plymouthbrethren.org.

Also online at <https://plymouthbrethren.org/author/873>

KEE Ministry Library · Faithful Men
kee-ministry-library.netlify.app

Vanity of Vanities; All is Vanity

Thoughts On Ecclesiastes

From two opposite points of view is life on earth generally regarded by mankind. The one half view it as a prospect opening out before them; the other half take a retrospective survey of all they have passed through.

Like the cloudless morning of a long summer's day does it appear to one just emerging from childhood, as radiant with hope he starts forth on his journey to realize the dream of his boyhood. Like the gloomy end of a winter's day does it appear to many a one who has reached the verge of that span ordinarily allotted to man on earth, as chastened and bowed down, it may be, with the remembrance of failures, the old man travels on to the tomb. Each has formed an estimate of what life here is, but the one speaks of what he hopes for and the other tells of that which he has found. A man's idea of a road he has not yet travelled will often turn out to be wrong; so youth's estimate of life is generally fallacious.

Can we trust to one who has travelled the road himself to give us a just idea of what life on earth really is? Each one can tell us of what he has found, and may seek to indoctrinate us with his own idea; but the picture will be differently coloured according to the trials or joys each has met with by the way. It will be but the experience of an individual after all.

Man wants something more. Where shall he find it? The wisdom of the ancients cannot supply it; the researches of those who have lived in our day cannot furnish us with it. It needs one gifted with real wisdom to estimate

it; it needs one able to search diligently into the things of earth to discover it. One, and one only, of the children of Adam has been competent for the task, and He has undertaken to perform it. What David, the man after God's own heart, could not have accurately delineated, that Solomon his son could and did; and the book of Ecclesiastes is the utterance of the Preacher, dictated by the Spirit of God, to provide man authoritatively from God, but also experimentally by the wisest of men, with a just estimate of what life here below for a child of Adam really is.

Endowed by God with a measure of wisdom surpassing all before him, "For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol" (1 Ki. 4:31), and never equalled by any that have come after him, king in Jerusalem, possessed of wealth beyond any monarch the world has ever seen ("silver... was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon"), all that wealth could purchase, all that power could command, all that wisdom could search out, he could enjoy and understand. "What," then, "can the man do that cometh after the king?" "Who can eat, or who else can hasten [or enjoy] hereunto, more than I?" (Eccl. 2:12, 25).

This was no idle boast. A man of pleasure, a votary of science, the ruler over kings, meting out justice to his subjects, answering all the hard questions of the Queen of Sheba, fertile in invention, diligent in study, rich in all that constituted the wealth of a nomad, pastoral, or settled, and highly civilized people, what source of pleasure was sealed up to him or what field of knowledge on earth was kept from him? Of all the pleasures that man can revel in, he had drunk deep,

while at the same time he investigated the works of God and learned those laws by which the life and order of the universe are regulated. And, when we speak of Solomon's wisdom, we must remember it was not mere genius as people speak, nor the fruit of matured study and diligent attention; but God gave him wisdom and knowledge, besides riches, wealth and honour, such as none of the kings that had been before him, neither shall any after him have the like (2 Chron. 1:12). Such was the one appointed to depict faithfully what the life on earth of a fallen creature is, and only can be, as One and One alone who has trod this earth as man, has rightly and fully exhibited what man should be. David's son describes the one; David's Lord has set forth the other.

The book of Ecclesiastes then is of great value, and might profitably be studied by men of the world in our day. Its writer had no reason to bear a grudge against the world: as men would say, it had used him well, conceding him his place, paying him due honour, and rendering him full homage to his marvellous wisdom. For "King Solomon passed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom. And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom, that God had put in his heart. And they brought every man his present, vessels of silver, and vessels of gold, and raiment, harness, and spices, horses, and mules, a rate year by year" (2 Chron. 9:22-24).

Competent then surely to tell us what life is, what has he to say of it? how does he describe it? "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). Were these the words of a disappointed man whose hopes had been cruelly crushed and himself roughly treated by the way, none could wonder at such a

commencement. But these are the words of the most prosperous, humanly speaking, of men the world has ever witnessed. "Vanity of vanities" - a mere breath, a vapour passing over the earth, short-lived in its existence, such is the recorded experience of the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and that not of some things, but of all - "All is vanity," "saith the Preacher." And here he takes a title not elsewhere met with outside this book - Preacher. He would collect those about him who were desirous to hear and instruct them, for such is the meaning of the term. So, while other portions of Scripture treat of the future and the path of the righteous on earth, this addresses itself to all whose hearts are in the world pursuing the occupations of life, and tells them what they really are, as the king's son has discovered by his own experience and has recorded by the pen of inspiration for the instruction of all who will hearken to him.

"What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" He takes up the diligent, well-occupied man, toiling away, the man who finds plenty to do and is happy in doing it, thoroughly engaged in the business of life. But why this cry of the Preacher who "sought to find out acceptable words"? (Chap. 12:10). And why does he view things so mournfully? The secret comes out. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever." The earth abides; man does not; hence the question that needs no answer, "What profit," etc.

And here we are furnished with a view of death of which it is well for man to be reminded. Death is the wages of sin, but it is not viewed in this aspect in Ecclesiastes. It is not the reason of its entrance into the world that

Solomon dilates on, but its presence here as a worm at the root of the tree of pleasure (Chap. 2:15; 3:19-20; 5:15; 6:6; 9:3). It mars pleasure, it chills enjoyment, for it cuts off man just when he would sit down after years of toil to reap the fruit of his labour. How different was the prospect of Adam ere he fell! How different will be the experience of saints during the Millennium and of men on the new earth! But now to man, feeling the consequences of the fall, death is the great marplot blasting all his hopes. What takes place after death is another matter; other scriptures set that forth. This book regards death from this side of the grave, and shows how it effects a severance between man and the fruits of all his labour which he thinks he is just about to reap.

And the misery of it is just this: man has laboured for years and looks naturally to enjoy what he, not others, has amassed, but finds death comes in and takes him away, so he leaves all the fruit of his labour to be enjoyed by another. "There is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil" (Chap. 2:21).

What a trouble then is death - an unwelcome visitor which none can keep out of his house. It comes unbidden, at an unseasonable time in man's eyes, and strips its victim of everything; for "As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?" (Chap.

5:15-16). And whatever his position on earth, all finally go to one place (Chap. 6:6) the rich, the poor, the wise, the fool, the righteous, the wicked are found at last with the untimely birth which has never seen the sun. And death, the great leveller of all ranks, reduces man to a level below himself, even to that of the beasts; "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go into one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Chap. 3:19-20). With the thread of man's life thus unrolling before him, at one end of it his exit from the womb, at the other end his exit from the world by death, all that is seen being the transient existence of a mortal born to die, we can understand the reason of that cry, "What profit hath a man," etc.

But if death deprives a man of the enjoyment of the fruits of his toil, his life and all that surrounds him speaks of ceaseless and reiterated labour. The work begun is never perfected. Things in heaven and things on earth proclaim this. "The sun ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose, going toward the south, and turning again to the north" (thus some connect verses 5 and 6). Each day the work is done, only to be repeated again the next day. Each year the course it has traversed is traversed again.

"The wind," too, "whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits." The rivers are ever running to the sea, "yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again," or perhaps better, "unto the place where the rivers go, thither they turn to go." "All things

are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."

Thus nature would teach him, if he regarded it aright, that here, as yet, no abiding rest can be enjoyed. Life is a busy scene. What has been will be, and there is nothing new under the sun. And to complete the picture of vanity, "there is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after." The obliviousness in Solomon's days of what had gone before was not a feature peculiar to his time. It has, it will, characterize man in all ages. What profit then is there in the labour of man? What has been done will be done again, and what has been effected will be forgotten by the generations which may come after.

With this, as the preface to his book, the Preacher proceeds to show that he writes not from hearsay, nor culls the wisdom of others, but has tried for himself what life under the sun is for one of the human race (Chap. 1:12-2:26).

He set himself absolutely to the task of searching out by wisdom all things that are done under the sun. In this he made good use of that wonderful gift God had bestowed on him. He beheld them all, "And behold," he writes, "all was vanity and vexation of spirit." Man may see the defects, be conscious of the want, but he cannot supply it. What a condition to be in! Such is man's condition on earth as one who has departed from God. He must feel keenly, if he feels at all, how bitter are the results of turning from the living and true God. He sees what is crooked, discerns what is wanting, but cannot put things straight, nor supply that which is lacking. "All the

foundations of the earth are out of course" are the words of Asaph. "All is vanity and vexation of spirit" is the experience of the king's son. And this, we must remember, is not the experience of the sinner reaping the fruit of what he has sown, but one of the old creation (though a sinner himself) feeling the ruin and disorder sin has brought on the earth.

As originally created by God, man was meant to find unalloyed delight on earth, with a nature capable of enjoyment, a mind capable of instruction and expansion, and a frame capable of exertion; and everything around him would have ministered to his pleasure, or have afforded opportunities for the full development of his faculties. Is that the case now? Let us listen to the words of the Preacher again: "I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Chap. 1:16-18). This is human experience, yet not the experience which of necessity a man must have, but the experience of all men who are still suffering under the consequences of the fall. And however great man may be on earth, whatever be the powers of his mind or the yearnings of his heart, he cannot as a child of Adam get beyond what is here described. Like some fair ruin, with here and there traces of exquisite workmanship still remaining by which we can contrast the evident design of the architect with the present condition of the building, so

we can discern in man's feelings and powers what he was originally capable of, while compelled to own he is but a wreck of that noblest of God's works first seen on the sixth day of creation.

But whence did he acquire that experience which enabled him to pronounce such a verdict on all the pursuits of men under the sun? He tells us: "I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting (or guiding] mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts [or, as it might be rendered, and perhaps more correctly, 'a wife and wives,' that is, many wives]. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart

rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour" (Chap. 2:1-10).

Such was the wide range of pleasures, intellectual and carnal, that he explored. Nothing was withheld of any joy; but while entering so keenly into all that he describes, he tells us his wisdom remained with him. Fully competent then was he from personal experience, and from the wisdom which never forsook him, to estimate aright what all this was worth. Would not such a one be satisfied with what this life afforded? If others less favoured were disappointed, he at least had his fill of everything he desired. And, having drunk deeply of all that could be indulged in, he has left on record what he found it all to be, "Behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun." He discerned the value of wisdom; it "excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness"; but to the fool, as well as to the wise, death comes, and after death the fool and wise are forgotten; yes, the wise man dies as the fool. Hence he hated life, and he hated all the labour which he had laboured under the sun, because he must leave it to the man that shall be after him; and who knows, he mournfully asks, whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?

History answers the question, and illustrates forcibly the vanity of all things which he felt so keenly. Rehoboam forsook the counsel of the old men that had stood before Solomon his father, and lost by his act of folly the allegiance of the ten tribes. He forsook also the Lord after three years of his reign had elapsed, witnessed the invasion of Shishak king of Egypt, and lost the treasures Solomon had amassed. The shields of gold went to swell the coffers of Egypt and Rehoboam had to substitute

shields of brass in their stead. From speaking of himself Solomon turns to others and, taking a survey of all things done under the sun, declares all is vanity.

Of wealth he speaks. It has its use. Money is a defence (Chap. 7:12); it is God's gift; yet how often do men feel the vanity of it all. Coveted, toiled after as the one great good, the man acquires wealth, fills his coffers, and yet is unsatisfied. If childless, he may desire offspring, but children are God's gift, not to be purchased by money. If he loves silver, he will not be satisfied with it (Chap. 5:10). How can things of earth really satisfy an immortal spirit? If he feasts his eyes with his money today, it may vanish away shortly, and he be left with an heir - his own child - born to inherit beggary (vv. 13-14). Again, if he has been prospered to the last, and his riches have not fled away, he must leave them; for as he entered the world, so must he leave it. Death summons him, but not his goods with him. All that he has remains behind him, while he, naked as he entered into the world, passes out of it by the portal of death. Riches cannot satisfy the soul; they cannot buy off death, nor can their owner insure their retention for the morrow. So Solomon admonishes his fellow creatures, "What profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?"

Again the Preacher speaks and discourses about wisdom. He acknowledged its value, for none were more competent than he was to speak of it. It strengthens the wise men more than ten mighty men which are in the city. It is better than strength, he could say, and better than weapons of war (Chap. 7:11-19; 9:16, 18). But here also the vanity of all things done under the sun made itself felt; for when he applied his heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on the earth, as he

turned to behold the works of God, he found a limit to the prosecution of his researches; and as he surveyed the works of men, he was only made more painfully conscious of the wretchedness and ruin brought in by sin.

Of the works of creation he had learned a great deal, as is elsewhere recorded; but man is but a finite being, unable to fathom the infinite. This Solomon discovered. "I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea, further, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it" (Chap. 8:17). There are fields of knowledge beyond man's capacity to explore or even reach. He may, like Solomon, arrive at this point, to learn from all he knows, how little he knows; how knowledge acquired is the mother of many a question which the student is unable to answer; and how incompetent he is to understand even all that he sees around him. Such must ever be his condition here. By the light of revelation we can look onward to a day when we shall, but not down here, know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12).

Turning to investigate the actions of men, he may learn the evils that are done under the sun - the crying injustice, the lawlessness, the frauds, and many acts of oppression that are constantly practiced among men - to find, while he sees them, his powerlessness to hinder them (Chap. 3:16; 8:14). Another arm is alone able to restrain the lawless; another mind than any of Adam's fallen descendants can alone devise the remedy. The day of the Son of man must dawn ere One will be found on earth competent to put things straight. How often is

justice now perverted! The righteous suffer and the guilty go free. Folly is set in great dignity and the rich sit in a low place. Servants ride on horses and princes walk as servants on earth (Chap. 10:6-7). And the wise man, courted for his help in time of pressing need, is forgotten when the hour of distress has passed away (Chap. 9:1, 5). Thus wisdom may disclose to its possessor what is wrong, and make him feel the bitterness of it, sensible all the time of his powerlessness to correct it. To know good and evil was the bait held out by the serpent to be just like God. The wise man sees clearly the evil, knows what ought to be, but learns he cannot do it. And woman, originally God's provision for man, his suited help, is found to become, when a tool of the enemy, an instrument for his everlasting ruin (Chap. 7:26-29).

After this we may be prepared for the picture presented at the close of the book. Man, created originally in the image of God, not subject to death, is depicted as travelling onward to the tomb, learning as he goes along, as we have seen, that all around of things done under the sun are vanity; and at the close of his life, giving in his own death a most convincing proof of the accuracy of the Preacher's statement, "All is vanity." Beautiful is the poetry of the description, but sad are the features of it.

While others may love to describe what man might have been, Solomon tells us what he is; but he speaks not of his greatness, his powers of mind or body; he writes of decay. Created to be the lord of God's creation on earth, manifesting the power of mind over matter; a pigmy by the side of the everlasting hills, yet able to accomplish gigantic works which seem almost to defy the ravages of

time; far inferior to many of the animals in brute strength, yet able to subdue them and to make the forces of nature subservient to his will; what might he not have been had sin not entered into the world? A worn out vessel, his strength decayed, his knees tottering, his hands trembling, his sight failing, his ears dull of hearing; all that once charmed him, able to charm him no longer, a mere wreck of what he was, awaiting the hour of his departure to his long home: such is he as described by Solomon who will wonder that the burden with which he began is the burden with which he ends. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity" (Chap. 1:2; 12:8).

But amid all that spoke of vanity there was another subject he touched on, for, being wise, he taught the people. He had spoken at length about man and his works; he speaks briefly about God and what He does. And what he says about God (for the name Jehovah does not occur in the book) only brings out in higher relief the ruined condition of man. Man abides not, his thoughts perish, his works crumble to dust, and his name is forgotten. Created originally not for death, he is now born to die; but God abides. "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before Him" (Chap. 3:14). Here in the midst of what is transient is something permanent. This he had found and desired to impress on others (Chap. 5:1-7; 11:9; 12:1). He would tell the creature of the Creator. It is not grace that he is charged to proclaim; it is not salvation he is empowered here to offer; but to God's creatures, responsible as such to Him that made them, he would speak. The Creator will take

cognisance of, and make judicial inquiry into, the actions of His creatures. This none can escape, and of this all need to be reminded. And now that he has exposed the vanity of all things that are done under the sun, he opens out the only word for man to follow: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Chap. 12:13). The fuller light that we possess confirms all that Solomon said of man, and tells us likewise more about God; but the principle here enunciated is true for all time - the creature should own the authority of God and yield implicit obedience to all He is pleased to enjoin. "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Chap. 12:14).

And just where Ecclesiastes ends, Proverbs begins. Ecclesiastes exposes the vanity of all things here; Proverbs tells us of true wisdom. Ecclesiastes lands man as man in decay and death; Proverbs holds out life, and tells us how to walk wisely on earth. In perfect keeping with this are the subjects of their closing chapters. What Ecclesiastes describes has been briefly referred to. What Proverbs speaks of, is man and woman in their respective spheres; the man, King Lemuel, ruling; the woman, the virtuous wife, guiding the house wisely and well. We see them in their work, but we read of no end to it. Death is not introduced as cutting short their career of usefulness, or carrying them away, when helpless, by old age. They exemplify what Solomon had taught his son would flow from the possession of that wisdom which is to be desired - life. And we close the book, feeling that we leave them, as it were, the one on the throne and the other in the house. We come to the

end of the book of Proverbs, but we leave them still in life and activity.