



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“IS THAT ALL THERE IS”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: Ecclesiastes 2
Date: October 26, 1969

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on October 26, 1969.

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (Ecclesiastes 2).

Next, review the outline of the sermon. Reflect on the chosen scripture and how you would “fill in” the remainder of the message from the chosen passage.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

There was a handwritten note on the bulletin for that day:

"On this reformation Sunday, we give thanks for the conviction of men who with courage spoke the gospel in a day when the Good News was lost in a church that had frozen into institutionalism. We pray for the Roman Church -- that it may be liberated by the power of Thy Spirit to speak Thy word with truth and courage. Grant that the peace, unity and purity of the church may be maintained. We pray for the United Presbyterian Church."

The hymns that day were "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim," "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine," and "Take My Life, and Let It Be Consecrated."

Keeping in mind the national situation in 1969, when this sermon was preached, a discussion was being held that morning on the selective service. A Quaker discussed resisting the draft while a member of the congregation who was in the military spoke on supporting the draft.

I. Introduction

A. A month ago we preached from Proverbs.

1. Today, another from the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament.

B. Written in its present form somewhere around 200 BC, it expresses the cynicism that came out of Ptolemaic period -- when Greeks were ruling over Israel.

1. A period of prosperity where at least the wealthy could afford the luxury of cynicism.
2. Greek stoicism challenged the early Hebrew assumptions that the righteous would prosper and the evil would come to a bad end.

II. The Search for Happiness

A. "I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." (1:12)

1. "In much wisdom is much vexation; he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." (1:18)
2. "Of making many books, there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." (12:12)
3. We live in a society that has made education a form of idolatry.
 - a) *We have set up education as the criterion for success in almost every field.*
 - (1) The pedigree is the thing, whether in medicine, social work, business.
 - (2) An employee of University of Pittsburgh speaks of the perennial student, who escapes life by staying in school.
4. How often I heard my father say, "If we could only give common sense along with the diploma!"
5. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

B. Pleasure "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself . . . so I hated life . . . for all is vanity and a striving after wind." (2:1, 2:17)

C. **Wealth** "I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees." (2:4) "Then I considered all that my hands had done." (2:11)

D. **Work** "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?" (2:18) (See 4:4)

E. **Justice** "Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them!" (4:1)

F. **The sum of it: Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"** (1:2)

1. This is the classic expression of existentialism.

III. Is That All There is?

A. **Peggy Lee asks the same question.**

1. She looks back over her life; everything that had given promise of being the great moment of life turned to ashes in her mouth.
2. "Let's break out the booze and keep on dancing."

RECORD

B. The Fire

1. The great tragedy -- the world burning down around her.
 - a) *Yet she survived, and life went on.*

C. The Circus

1. My first circus was a disappointment.
 - a) *Of course tight rope walkers walk tight ropes.*
 - b) *Of course elephants look like the books pictured.*
2. A child's imagination is so much more fertile than the artificial things Barnum conjured up.
3. The woods behind the house hold many more wonders than the circus, for these are the child's own discoveries.

D. Love

1. With four teenagers, and one just out and one just entering, this is a very current item of interest.
2. So much joy -- so much suffering. We cover it for our children, but brace ourselves for the disappointments.
3. Love for adults.
 - a) *This isn't rock or soul -- it is beamed primarily for tired business men and suburban housewives.*
 - b) *"Love" is the object of a gigantic con game.*
 - (1) Most adults feel that something is missing -- and keep striving for that one secret that will open the door to the magic they haven't found quite yet.
 - (2) The movies, the lurid books, the magazines that are beamed more to the frustrated middle-aged than to youth.
 - (3) Intellectually we know better -- but keep hoping that we will find out something we didn't know that will make the difference.
 - (4) The secret is not in mechanics, but in the ultimate confidence of a man and a woman in one another.
 - a) *No gimmick -- no new position can replace this.*

IV. Jesus' Response

A. Whosoever would save his life will lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

1. Did Jesus achieve happiness? -- a totally irrelevant question.
 - a) *He answered this question in the 40 days in the wilderness.*
2. He is worshipped by one billion people 2000 years after his death:
 - a) *Was little more than literate.*
 - b) *Never had sex relations.*
 - c) *Never owned a Cadillac -- had to borrow the donkey with which he entered Jerusalem.*
 - d) *Owned nothing but the coat on his back.*
3. Yet Jesus did find joy in living.
 - a) *The Wedding feast -- the sailing -- his appreciation of the fields.*
 - b) *His weeping for Lazarus revealed the depth of his love.*
 - c) *His desire to avoid Calvary revealed his love of life.*

B. Can we imagine Jesus saying from the cross, "Is that all there is?"

1. Rather, "Into Thy hands, I commend my spirit."

V. Conclusion

There is a place for Ecclesiastes. Were it all we knew of Scripture, we would have little hope. But its presence, with its stark honesty, keeps religion from falling into sentimentality by these probing, disturbing questions. We are indebted to Peggy Lee for bringing to the surface the question that for many of us lingers just beneath the conscious level, and makes us face up to our purpose in life.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading:

Ecclesiastes 2: 1 through 3 say: ¹ I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility. ² I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” ³ I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

- What would you put on a list of things it would be good for the sons of men to do all the days of their lives?

Ecclesiastes 2: 4 through 8 say: ⁴ I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; ⁵ I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; ⁶ I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. ⁸ Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

- What would you put on a list of the earthly things you have accomplished?

Ecclesiastes 2: 9 through 11 say: ⁹ Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. ¹⁰ All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

- When you review the list of your achievements, are there any that are not mere vanity?

Ecclesiastes 2: 12 and 13 say: ¹² So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? ¹³ And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

- In your life, how do you focus on having wisdom excel folly and light excel darkness?

Ecclesiastes 2: 14 and 15 say: ¹⁴ The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. ¹⁵ Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity."

- What do you do so that you do not walk in darkness?

Ecclesiastes 2: 16 and 17 say: ¹⁶ For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! ¹⁷ So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

- What have you done in your life that does *not* seem futile?

Ecclesiastes 2: 18 through 26 say: ¹⁸ Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. ²⁰ Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. ²¹ When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. ²² For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. ²⁴ There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? ²⁶ For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

- In what ways has God given you wisdom and knowledge and joy?
- Who do you know who is simply gathering and collecting? How can you share God's wisdom with that person?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

I.A.1. -- Originally the word was affluence but was changed to prosperity. What does that change suggest to you?

II.A. How do you seek and search out wisdom to guide your daily life?

II.A.3. What do you think is lacking in the education we are providing for our young people today?

II.A.4. How can we help our young people to have common and spiritual sense as well as book knowledge?

II.D. What are you leaving that you will be proud to leave? What do you focus on building that really won't matter?

III. If you have never heard the Peggy Lee song, try to find it online and listen to it or at least search for the lyrics. Have you ever felt the way the songwriter felt? How did you get past it?

III.C.3. How can we encourage children to be less programmed and freer to explore their own imaginations? How can that help them to develop a richer spiritual life?

III.D.3.B. How do you think the media portrayal of "love" has changed since 1969? Is it for the better or the worse?

Just before IV: There is a handwritten note: "Is that all there is?"

IV. A. Not everyone will be called upon to literally give up his or her life for Christ. In what ways can you "lose" your life for Jesus?

IV.3. Make a list of the true joys in your life. What do they have in common?

V. What in your life keeps you from asking "is that all there is?"