

# Vanity of vanities; Joy of joys!

*Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.*

Thus King Solomon starts his work now titled *Ecclesiastes*, one of three books of the Old Testament that have him as author. Though he had everything one could ever want – a mighty kingdom, wisdom, wealth, and wives – one question spoiled the enjoyment of his riches: *what is it actually all worth?*

Solomon (here styling himself as the ‘Preacher’) embarks on a quest, travelling all throughout his kingdom, hoping to come across anything which might satisfy this aching void within him. The things he witnessed on his journey and the insights gained from them he then recorded in this book, that his subjects might also profit from his investigation, making *Ecclesiastes* a very practical text. It is not some abstract work of philosophy, but a something born out of his own personal experiences. Everyone will be able to relate to the words he shares.

This work therefore sticks out to me from the rest of the Old Testament canon. Almost all the preceding books have been historical accounts. But *Ecclesiastes* is more akin to a journal. Indeed it is one of the few books of Scripture written in the first person, giving it a personal quality which the others lack. *Proverbs* is the lofty words of wisdom given from father to son, but *Ecclesiastes* shows Solomon’s humanity and weakness as he faces this existential crisis.

I myself have been grappling with the issue of life’s vanity recently, though it brings me comfort to know that I am far from the only one to have dealt with this grand question. Nothing is as universal a human experience as seeking a solution to this problem; A problem so fundamental to our frameworks of value and worth, that whatever way in which we choose to tackle this problem thereafter dictates all aspects of our lives.

Solomon himself, the great king of Israel, struggled with this also. Eagerly, then, I turned to his work on this topic, hoping that the one upon whom God bestowed His heavenly wisdom must surely have the answer.

But the king returns with a solemn conclusion, and one that I am sure many of us share: all is vanity.

Vanity, not only in that it is worthless but also fleeting. What has caused it all to be vanity? It is death: *One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.* As Solomon goes from place to place, he sees both the sick and the healthy, the poor and the wealthy, the fool and the wise, the slave and the free come to their end. None can escape it, and none will. In the end even the Preacher, *in all his glory*<sup>1</sup>, passed away *like the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven*<sup>2</sup>.

We’d all rather postpone the thought of death. But, as Solomon slowly realised during his quest, the inevitability of this fate invades into every single aspect of our lives. All that we are and do during our short time on earth is stained, and ended, by the eventual failure of our strength; it is inescapable. This grave realisation, along with all the brokenness and suffering he witnessed, weighed heavy upon the Preacher’s heart. The knowledge of this solemn truth he experienced as a vexation of spirit, writing: *For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow*<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>St. Matthew 6:29

<sup>2</sup>St. Matthew 6:30

<sup>3</sup>Ecclesiastes 1:18

Death is the great equaliser, for we all share the same fate, no matter our wealth or power. Death is also the great relativiser, as none that we have and make will be carried with us beyond the grave. This is a recurring theme within this work of Solomon. A pattern emerges, where he praises labour, life, and laughter as great blessings at first, but then declares them as vanity afterwards. This makes Ecclesiastes very confusing to read the first time, as it seems like Solomon has got himself stuck in a paradox: how can these things be valuable, yet vain at the same time?

This structure of Ecclesiastes is intentional. It reflects our current reality, that these two mutually exclusive things seem to be true simultaneously. And it is why the grounded nature of this book speaks to us so powerfully. We innately find great value in labour, works, arts, wealth, and happiness; but our innate sense of this value seems to be false, for it all means nothing after we pass away. We all have some intuition of this absurd paradox we live in. But the contrast and dissonance expressed by the Preacher's words through common experience help us to truly feel the same with our mortality.

We are all ourselves aware of the value of work. That is to say, we regard something acquired as more valuable if we gain it by some effort. A good example of this intuition of ours at play is the thought experiment of the "experience machine" or "pleasure cube". Most people would be uncomfortable to hook up to the machine, even if they are guaranteed a blissful state for the rest of their lives.

An aspect to our hesitation, I suppose, is the fact that pleasure is not all there is to life. It seems obvious to most that a life of just working to survive broken up intermittently with bodily pleasure like food, sex, drugs, and/or alcohol is a rather miserable, and frankly meaningless, one. By extension, plugging into the machine, living a life only of pleasure, diminishes our person. In the pleasure cube, everyone is the same. Though they are different individuals, they are all experiencing the exact same thing, doing the same amount of nothing. We lose who we are as persons if we are naught but consciousnesses seeking only pleasure day after day. We become like animals, who lack personhood and which strive only to procreate further.

In our modern day, bodily pleasures have been further enhanced, and much easier to get. Think the great number of narcotics now accessible, the wide variety of alcohols, online gambling, social media, and especially pornography. These [hyperpleasures](#) raise our tolerance for "regular" pleasures, and spoil the enjoyment of them. They take us captive, and exploit our creaturely biology to extract our time and money. They are trivially accessible, and somehow even more vain. In this age of pleasure and meaninglessness, we forget what it is that makes us human.

Ecclesiastes is not wholly useless to us, though. It plays a special role within Scripture. By laying out this paradox it stirs us from whatever slumber we may find ourselves in. Often we are apt to ignore or insulate ourselves from our looming fate, and what it means for our lives. But whatever we try to fill this void with will ultimately mean nothing. To ignore the truth will only make us slaves to vanity, wasting our lives with the mere illusion of control and meaning. But to face reality and to meditate upon the implications of a finite life will also cause despair, as it did to Solomon.

Though when we look at his words more closely, we will start to see our first hints towards the solution of the paradox. Two things indeed may be true at the same time. Wisdom, though so highly praised by Solomon in his two other books, seems to be ultimately worthless in the Preacher's eyes, just like all the other things he names. However, its vanity is also found in a certain attitude towards wisdom. Wisdom is truly good, as Solomon emphasises many times in Proverbs, Song of Songs, and also in Ecclesiastes. But it is not the end-all-be-all. He gives a few reasons throughout the book: Wisdom does not guarantee happiness<sup>4</sup>, for it will often reveal to us many sad truths. Wisdom does

---

<sup>4</sup>Ecclesiastes 1:17-18

not guarantee a long life or health<sup>5</sup>. Wisdom will not make us rich, and the most foolish among us seem to be the wealthiest. Our wisdom is finite, and we won't be able to truly comprehend everything<sup>6</sup>. Then Solomon relates a story near the end of this work:

*There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that rules among fools<sup>7</sup>.*

Wisdom, therefore, should not be sought after for wisdom's sake, for it is by itself only vanity. If we spend our lives striving only to increase in wisdom, we shall ultimately find ourselves sorely disappointed. And so it is with all the things he covers in his book. We must not follow after happiness only, though it is called good<sup>8</sup>, for in the end we will have gained nothing<sup>9</sup>. We must not find our value in labour and works, for it will mean nothing after death. So also the wealth we gather in this life is worthless, as we can take none of it beyond the grave.

However, Solomon frequently affirms what we feel, that all these are great blessings. Though these things be good, they must not be our sole focus, for death puts an end to it all. Solomon calls us to enjoy these blessings with gratitude, contentment, and good works; but not to waste our lives by centring them on this enjoyment.

Knowing this, though, does not actually solve the core issue that our lives are meaningless due to death. After twelve chapters, the Preacher finally gives us the following answer: *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil<sup>10</sup>.*

And here is where it starts to get interesting. Though this conclusion might sound very disappointing and dry at first, this sentence connects us to the broader arc of the Bible's narrative; and there we shall find the missing pieces to this grand puzzle.

First, that we shall stand before judgement means that, though our bodies may die, our souls do not. It also means that there is something after death, and that our actions, though they may seem vain now, do have consequences in the hereafter. Judgement of the good and bad entails the existence of a God who is just. A perfectly just God must also be perfectly good, for against what measure would He be passing his perfect judgement? The fact that God also sees every *secret* thing means that He must be omniscient, which arguably requires omnipresence and omnipotence.

These two sentences Solomon writes therefore introduce a great Being whom we shall meet after death, and Who will bring to effect all that we've done in life. Though it may seem a solemn conclusion, there is so much joy that hides behind these words. A very important phrase is embedded in the centre:

*This is the whole duty of man.* We do not exist merely as meaningless accidents of matter, but our lives have a definite purpose, here meant by duty. If our existence has a certain meaning, that would entail that the great Being has created us with that purpose in mind.

---

<sup>5</sup>Ecclesiastes 2:14-15

<sup>6</sup>Ecclesiastes 8:17

<sup>7</sup>Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

<sup>8</sup>Ecclesiastes 3:12, 3:22, 8:15

<sup>9</sup>Ecclesiastes 2:2, 2:10-11

<sup>10</sup>Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Indeed this is what we find right at the start of Scripture. There we read of an infinite Being pouring His overflowing love and joy into the creation of a perfect world. His infinite creativity and goodness brings forth the mighty oceans, tall mountains, vast beaches and landscapes, the rainy clouds, birds of many amazing colours, beautiful creatures of all sizes and shapes, trees, plants, and sundry fruits for all to enjoy! At each step He declares what He has made as *good*. Finally, the Father of all creation forms the crown jewel of all His works: mankind. Giving life to two humans, He imbues them with His own breath, bestowing upon them an honour unthinkable: His image. Each and every person is an *image* of God! Just as God is creative, just, rational, personal, and benevolent; so we are also, only in a finite form. Just like a painting is but a finite representation of a subject, we are images of God's being, giving each of us enduring worth.

It is then this *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, that set us apart from the rest of creation. We are still *creatures*, physical beings made of matter, but we are also *people*. The Image of God grants us *personhood*. And as people we can have relationships with each other, and also with God. This is what we were created for, to share in God's joy and love, thereby growing in His likeness and deepening our relationship with Him. God, the greatest Artist, has created each of us as His masterpieces to inhabit the great artwork of Creation.

There is a word that is crucial to this idea, which is *communion*. Wiktionary defines it as "a joining together of minds or spirits; a mental connection". As God is our creator, and the source of all life and joy, we find our truest fulfilment in being one with Him in spirit and in mind. We were created for communion with one another and with Him. This communion is found in doing, acting not only in accordance with His character in a moral sense but also in *creation*.

Creativity is one of the chief parts of that Godly image we carry, and it is directly tied to our personhood. Our ability of creative expression sets us apart from the rest of creation, for the joy found in creation and building is distinct from the pleasure found in creaturely things. Aptly, then, they are called "higher" pleasures; joy which go so much deeper than any bodily experience may do. Stories, poems, epics, artworks, music, sculptures, buildings and the like all remind us of something greater. They transport us to distant worlds, and connect us with a magical realm. Think of that series you read which left you sobbing at its close; or a movie or song which changed who you were as a person. Think of the artworks and cathedrals and epics which fill the landscape and its people with an enchantment that goes far beyond mere material enjoyment of something pleasant. The beauty we can create connects us to all Beauty Himself, the Creator Father!

For in God's infinite greatness is found infinite variety. And as each person carries God's Image, so they each carry their own aspect of His being. This is why there can be an infinite amount of humans, each with their own distinct personality and individual personhood, for personhood itself is found in God who is three Persons in one endless Being. Creativity, therefore, is an expression of the inner reality present within us. Through creative expression we make visible, and indeed experiential, what is found within the depths of our persons and in the infinite joyful nature of God. Each of us is given our own *joys*; those things which bring us, well, joy! These joys may truly be anything: joy in music, certain forms of art, creatures, logic, mathematics, organisation, charity, protecting, leading, nature, etc. They are what make us individual people, and channelling these joys into activity is what brings us the most fulfilment, above anything else we may do in life.

When we actively express our individual, unique person through creative activity, we also explore and deepen said personhood. We learn about ourselves and, crucially, about *God*. God wants to be with us in all that we do and in all that we are, for in Him is found all meaning and joy, and He wishes to share it with all His people! We do not write, paint, build, or sing alone; for we have not only each other, but God our Father Himself who is with each and every one of us! As each person's relationship with the Father is unique, so also their expression of some aspect of His nature is

different. We then learn more about our Creator, and grow in communion with Him, the more we spend time with Him by pouring the joys He has given us into creation, and enjoying those things others have created with their own particular perspective of God!

Let us return now to the first two humans. God had set them in a paradise He created for them, with many fruits to enjoy and at its centre the Tree of Life to eat from and live for ever! To humanity was given authority over all the creatures, not one of fear or power but of love; being, as it were, representatives of God's own authority over creation, as we carry His image. *God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth*<sup>11</sup>.

There in Eden heaven dwelt upon earth, and God dwelt among His creation, among His children. They would spend all eternity growing in their understanding of Him, spending their time doing everything with Him. One commandment He gave them, not to eat from one particular tree.

But they did. And they hid themselves from God, though they had before been happy in His loving presence.

I want to bring special attention to the consequences of what they had done. Specifically what is said unto Adam:

*Because you have hearkened unto the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you, saying, you shall not eat of it: cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow shall you eat of it all the days of your life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you; and you shall eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, till you return unto the ground; for out of it were you taken: for dust you are, and unto dust you shall return*<sup>12</sup>.

These words God spoke, not in some spiteful anger, but to those whom He loved dearly, infinitely; telling them solemnly what would come of their decision, their betrayal of Him and the Image in which He created them.

Sin they brought into the world, and the peace and goodness of paradise was now broken. No longer could they live off of just the fruit of the trees, and spend their eternity enjoying the many blessings of creation and creating in their Father's joyful presence. Now the two people had become mortal, and would have to spend all their days working hard just to survive for a little while and eventually die. The Image which they carried was marred. Divorced from God's goodness humans became selfish, violent, lustful, and sinful.

Humanity, meant to be the representatives of God on earth, brought all creation with them into corruption. All creatures had become mortal, and would now have to hunt, hide, kill, forage, and run to survive. They would now fear humans, and each other. Harmony had become chaos, joy had become sorrow. Humanity and creation are now slaves to vanity, and cut off from communion with God. As Adam and Eve hid from God's love, now also we hide ourselves and our acts from the Light of Life. The effects of this sin is what Solomon witnessed in all its evil throughout His investigation.

Evil is a parasitic thing. Existence is a good in itself, and indeed Creation was called good many times by God. Evil needs something good to corrupt in order to exist, and it can therefore only be destructive, rather than constructive. Good brings forth existence, corruption brings forth only death. But what does it mean to be corrupt, bad? Something, or someone, is corrupted once it is no longer what God made it to be. Devoid from God's infinite colour, beauty, and variety; evil is drab and boring.

---

<sup>11</sup>Genesis 1:28

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 3:17-19

Corruption cannot create anything unique, but may only level the joyful variety of good creation into uniformity and lifelessness. This spiritual reality is most obvious, for example, in the architecture of countries rife with corruption and evil, where all the urban areas look very much alike, and very much soulless and inhuman.

Evil can only consume what is good. And now, fallen from what God initially made us for, we are ordered to desire consumption rather than creation. We consume the earth's resources to suit our own material needs, we consume each other's company and relationships for bodily pleasure. And now our ever-growing lust for consumption has gone the deepest it can possibly go. The holy activity of creation has been replaced by the vain consumption of *content*, separate from any relationship with the One who gave us the great gift of joys and creativity in the first place. That personhood we once found in the process of making something creative, the joy we found in doing these things with our Creator, is then lost. We want the gratification of food, sex, happiness, and fulfilment; without having to grow crops, find relationships, do good, or make something ourselves. In the pleasure cube, everyone is the same, everyone is just some blob experiencing meaningless pleasure.

Generative AI is truly the final form of the all-consuming corruption which our fallen human nature has brought into the world. In an act of profound blasphemy we poured all of our creative works made with that holy gift into a machine born in our own broken, human image. But we cannot recreate that breath of Life, that Imago Dei which God poured into Adam; so all this evil black box can spit out are generic, uniform, soulless pieces of nothingness. Its sole purpose is to mimic the vague essence of the "content" we enjoy, to activate our creaturely neurons with colourful pixels and text that remind us of something creative, but which ultimately has no meaning and does not connect to anything *higher*.

Unsatisfied with destroying the planet to satiate our insatiable desire for consumption, we have sold our humanity also, and have got nothing in return. We have burned not only the beautiful earth we were given, but have forsaken that which made us human, the very last thing which connected us to our Creator. We have become orphans without a father, for our lives and works are now *vanity of vanities* due to our current mortality.

God doesn't *need* His creation. God is self-sufficient, and doesn't need humans to express His love. But even though we have betrayed Him millions upon millions of times, His Godly love is still infinitely more powerful! God looks with pity and compassion on the suffering of His beloved children and creation, even if we were the ones to have brought it upon ourselves, and have destroyed that which He gave us. He deeply, infinitely, *desires* all people to be happy, joyful, and safe in His fold. But as we are now corrupted, bent out of the design He initially intended, we can no longer stand within His holy presence, as it would instantly destroy us. He is perfect and infinitely holy, even one sin would put infinite distance between us and God. We also cannot make up for that sin by doing good, for that sin itself requires atonement, otherwise God would not be just. But that would entail eternal destruction, because the sin was against an eternal and infinite God. All of humanity was thus condemned to eternal fire, *for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*<sup>13</sup>. He therefore set up His own plan to save us from our death and vanity, for to bring us back into communion with Himself.

Right after the curse was announced unto the Serpent, God said to it:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup>Romans 3:23

<sup>14</sup>Genesis 3:15

Here the promise was given unto Eve that there shall come One from her descendants who would crush the head of the Serpent. This sad state of affairs will not be forever, and there is hope of future deliverance.

The rest of the Old Testament is an account of God steadily bringing about His plan for salvation over the course of thousands of years. God is shown repeatedly to be able to use all things for His own purpose. Even when men try to actively oppose His power, God turns it into good. I will not explore the importance of Old Testament events here, though that may come another time. What it all builds up to is the expectation of a Messiah, prophesied by countless prophets and promised by God a great number of times throughout the history of ancient Israel.

But God's plan was greater than any of the Israelites could expect. For it is not just some great prophet that would save them, but God Himself! God the Son came down from heaven and took on our human nature, dwelling among His own creation and people. He ate, drank, slept, wept, and worked like us, He went through life and all its difficulties like us. He fulfilled what Adam couldn't do, and lived a life of sinlessness and perfect communion with God.

The Creator Himself came to us to teach and to guide us, to heal us and help us. Eventually taking on the punishment of our sins, though He was Himself blameless. He was crucified at the hands of His own, and carried the infinite price that we ourselves could not carry.

But the Son of God left His tomb empty! On that morning, for the first time since the fall of man, death no longer had the final say over our lives. By dying and rising as a man, God has now freed our humanity from the vanity Solomon so thoroughly described. By restoring our nature, Jesus Himself is now the bridge between our broken nature and the holiness of God. Being made clean by His blood and body we may now enter into communion with our Father; back into His joy, care, love, and peace! He did not, however, only bring us back into the presence of God, but sent the Spirit of God upon His Church. This Spirit guides us, comforts us, and transforms our broken and corrupt souls into whom we were meant to be.

Now life is once more made meaningful. For though this body may die, we have an eternity of ever-increasing joy to look forward to! Here we may enter into communion with God to be adopted and saved. Our joys are restored, and now even more joyful, because they were once lost, but now are found! We were dead, but now our persons may live in Christ. That Image of God which makes us human is repaired, and our joys may again be used to deepen our communion with our Creator, preparing us for that Day when our bodies also, and indeed all creation, shall finally be freed from vanity once and for all!

*For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the slavery of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but we also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, that is to say, the redemption of our body<sup>15</sup>.*

*For you have not received the spirit of slavery again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father!<sup>16</sup>*

This life is but transitory, our true lives are yet to begin. God will return to His people, and once He does, He will create a new Heaven and new Earth, joined together into one Creation. There, with new immortal bodies, we will spend all eternity free from death, pain, sin, sorrow, vanity and darkness. No longer do we need to spend all our time just to survive, but we may eat from the Tree

---

<sup>15</sup>Romans 8:20-23

<sup>16</sup>Romans 8:15

of Life, and spend the rest of our time worshipping God in works and in praise! We shall see Him with our own eyes, and nothing will there separate us from the love and care of God.

Though while we are still here, and bound to mortal flesh, we are called to turn to the One who paid our ransom, and to surrender all that we are to Him. It is through the expressions of our joys and the virtues of Christ after repentance and rebirth that we then are steadily sanctified and our Imago Dei is redeemed. We become more “human”, more like who we were supposed to be, like our true selves. We become more like Christ, like the One who created us. This He does by doing these things with us, if we let Him. And so we are made ever joyful, and our works and joys are given life, colour, worth, purpose, and meaning! Or as C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*:

*There are no real personalities apart from God. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most ‘natural’ men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been; how gloriously different are the saints.*

*But there must be a real giving up of the self. You must throw it away ‘blindly’ so to speak. Christ will indeed give you a real personality; but you must not go to Him for the sake of that. As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about you are not going to Him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self (which is Christ’s and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.*

For what was once called vanity by Solomon due to our mortality, has now gained meaning in our eternal life found in God. Wisdom, though unprofitable for our material lives upon this old Earth, will guide us to endless Joy by the Holy Spirit poured out upon His Church! Laughter, once dampened and marred by death, is now so much greater in the happy fold of the Father! Work, labour, and wealth we will not take into the life that is to begin, but there we will gain something which will eternally overshadow whatever riches we had here.

This, my dear friends, is our Faith; and the Joy of the Gospel!

Glory be unto Christ our Shepherd, now and for ever more;

Amen.