**BCM Bible Study: March 17/18, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

Getting Started (15 minutes)

* Start by introducing yourself and giving others an opportunity to do the same. You could ask them to share a variety of things about themselves (major, hometown, etc.), but include something like:
  + Ask them to share why they decided to join a BCM family
  + Ask them to share what they are hoping to get out of being in a family group
* Take a minute to set the tone for the semester. Communicate your personal goals and hopes for them as a group and as individuals. This is a good opportunity to set the bar high for attendance and commitment. You can say something like “My hope is that everyone will prioritize this time together each week, because I think the more consistent everyone is, the better we get to know one another, and the more we will grow together.” Be excited!
* Take moment to address Covid. Remind your group that while we all have different viewpoints, we must do what is best to care for the most concerned and the most vulnerable. The following will be the norm for family groups during the spring semester:
  + Everyone needs to wear masks during family group time.
  + If you are sick or have had contact with someone who is Covid-positive, stay home! We can zoom you into Bible study.

Ecclesiastes Introduction

Ecclesiastes can be a tough book to understand! But its message is important and relevant for modern times. Here are some starting points to understanding Ecclesiastes:

* There is a speaker (known as the Teacher/Preacher) whose words are being recorded by the author of the book. We only hear from the author in 1:1 and 12:9-14. The author is recording the Teacher’s words and commending them to us. The Greek word for this Teacher is *ekklesiastes*, which is where we get the English title of the book. An ekklesiastes was a person who spoke to a crowd of people – we are joining the crowd.
* We do not know the identity of the author and speaker, and this seems to be purposeful. Many think Solomon is the author, but there is reason to believe this isn’t true. As you read Ecclesiastes, you will sometimes feel like you are hearing from different people. It seems that what is happening is that the author is taking on multiple personae to look at life from various different points of view. It’s as if he’s saying, “Now let’s look at life from the perspective of a king…Now, a servant.”

Everything is Meaningless? Vanity?

The key to understanding the message of Ecclesiastes is looking at most-used word in Ecclesiastes. **Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-2**.

* What do your different versions say for the repeated word in verse 2?
* What does it seem like the Teacher is communicating in this verse?

The Hebrew word here is *hevel*. This is a tough word to translate, but the sense of the word can be understood by its use elsewhere in the Bible. **Read Ps. 39:5,** **Ps. 144:4, Proverbs 31:30.**

* What is the sense of *hevel* in these verses?

The Teacher is using *hevel* in to communicate at least two things about human life:

1. Life is **fleeting and transient**. Some translate Ecc. 1:2 “The merest of breaths!” The message here is that life and the things in it are far from permanent.
2. Life is **elusive**. Our attempts to capture, control, manipulate, and understand life are futile, like trying to grasp the wind.
   * When have you personally experienced these realities of life?

**Read Ecclesiastes 1:3**. Considering what we have just learned, what does this verse challenge us to consider?

* This verse asks you to consider – at the end of your life, what “profit” do you hope to have? Can you have a surplus from all your toil? The answer is a resounding “no.” If life is viewed as an opportunity for gain, influence, or to come out “on top,” we will use anything around us for that end. This is the root of materialism. Sadly, many Christians look no different than non-Christians with regard to seeking happiness and fulfillment in this life. We look to make a mark and manipulate the world to achieve our goals. (summary of Iain Provan)
  + Do you find yourself falling into this way on thinking? How does your desire for possessions and influence impact your life now and plans for the future?
* In this book, we will be challenged in the ways we think about what makes for a well-lived life. We will *not* hear the Teacher say that human activity is meaningless. Instead: “Human goals should be set in accordance with the nature of reality, not in defiance of it.” (Provan) **Read Matthew 6:19-21, 25-34**
  + What would change about your life if you were to live it according to Matthew 6?

Your Life in View of the World: **Read Ecclesiastes 1:4-11**

* Verses 4-11 answer the rhetorical question posed in verse 3. What is the overall answer? How do these verses highlight the *hevel* of life?
* Verse 8 stands out as unique in this section. Most translations say “weary,” but the sense is more like “steady toil.” A summary could be: “Natural phenomena toil steadily without variation. Creation is a vast and intricate reality, which escapes the grasp of humans in speech, sight, and hearing; we are unable to find words for it, and all our looking at it and listening to it cannot comprehend it.” (Provan)
  + Do you relate to this idea? In what way does the majesty and constancy of the natural world fill you with awe?
  + Have you seen people abuse creation for their own gain? What is a healthy human relationship with the earth?
  + In light of all the new technology and developments of our time, what do you think of verse 10 and the idea that there are no new things? What is he talking about?

Conclusion and Challenge

Our lives, in the grand scheme of things, are a blip on the radar. Our job is simple: Accept reality as it is instead of seeking to manipulate the world to produce the outcome we want. We are called to live a life that accepts this reality of human limitation and morality, living faithfully to God in the present moment.

* This week, schedule at least 30 minutes to rest and be with God. No phone, work, agenda, or people. Go on a walk or simply be alone, putting aside your activity to be with God. I encourage you to be in nature and think about what we have read in Ecclesiastes 1.

Notes:

* There are many reasons to believe that Solomon is not the speaker in Ecclesiastes. First of all, the Hebrew dialect in Ecclesiastes would be way too late to be Solomon. A rebuttal to this argument would be that the author could have brought his words into Hebrew that was modern for his time. But more convincingly, there are sections where the perspective is decidedly *not* Solomon. Consider, for example, 5:8-9 and 8:1-9, which are written from the perspective of a subject under a ruler. At the end of the day, it is not really important for us to know who wrote Ecclesiastes. If the author wanted us to know, he would have made it clear. What is important is the message.
* It is hard to know where the author stops and the speaker starts in Ecc. 1. Some make a sharp divide between 1 and 2, or 2 and 3, but the language is somewhat unclear.
* One important thing to note about Ecclesiastes is that it is written in the Old Testament. Duh, I know. But remember, the author does not know about Jesus and the afterlife as we understand it. In Christ and the presence of the kingdom of God, we may very well find a different kind of “gain” from life than the Teacher. However, as we go through, we will see that the New Testament mindset is not too different. The general attitude of Jesus will be to give away your life knowing that you have a greater, lasting possession. The life of “gain” and “profit” is nowhere to be found in the teachings of Jesus. Just like Ecclesiastes, the New Testament calls us to live faithfully today, knowing that tomorrow is not promised. The big difference for us is that we have a clearer hope that the Teacher. Nonetheless, his faith in God is evident, given what he knows.