

Old Testament Lessons

OT Stories That Teach Us About God and Faith

October 18, 2020

I. Introduction

A. Last Sunday we looked at **Ecclesiastes 1:2-11**, and I used it as a short introduction to a theme that appears seven times in this book. Solomon identifies this theme with the phrase, “**striving after wind**.”

1. Five times the phrase says, “all is vanity and striving after wind.” Once it says, “all is futility and striving after wind.” And once it simply says, “striving after wind.”
2. This phrase is used by Solomon to point out the emptiness and ultimate worthlessness of striving to find meaning, purpose, importance, contentment, happiness, value, and self-worth by pursuing the kind of power, fame, possessions, experiences, and wisdom the world offers.
3. And why do such pursuits turn out to be empty and worthless? Because the only meaning, purpose, importance, contentment, happiness, value, and self-worth that perpetually and eternally satisfies is found by trusting God, striving to know God, living for God, and pursuing godliness.
4. In other words, trying to find a meaningful, satisfying, fulfilling life in and from the world when such things can only be found in and from God, is vanity, futility, and striving after wind.

B. Pray

II. Striving After Wind

A. **Ecclesiastes 1:12-15** . . . I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. [13] And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven (*includes what must be done, what has been done beyond what must be done, and what it all has accomplished*). It is a grievous task (*the process of learning by having to research and explore intensively and extensively*) which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with (*God created us – mind and body – and as our creator He decided how best we would learn the more difficult, and even the more important truths in life*). [14] I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and **striving after wind**. [15] What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted (*The things that must be done – like the pursuit of food, shelter, and clothing – always must be done, and*

there is no way to change that. What we strive to do beyond what must be done, is either accomplished and therefore can be counted, or it remains an unfulfilled desire – such as living on Mars – and can't be counted as if it were accomplished – no matter how much effort has been put into it.).

1. There are things in life that **must be done** to sustain life. And yet, even if we accumulate more than we need, if we die as an unbeliever, all that we have labored for will have been like striving after wind, for it will not have gained us what we need most – God, forgiveness of sin, justification by God, sanctification, and eternal life with God. Jesus confirmed this in His parable about the rich man and Lazarus.
2. Throughout history, people have done more than what must be done. For example, there have been many inventions, along with amazing advancements in education, science, health care, technology, transportation, and space travel. Plus, people keep looking for new ways of doing things. And yet none of these advancements can redeem our soul from the penalty of sin. Therefore, all the hard work and long hours spent to have these added blessings will turn out to be like striving after wind if we don't also have God and the saving work of Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus put it this way in **Matthew 16:26**, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

B. **Ecclesiastes 1:16-18** . . . I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." [17] And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly (*the foolishness of living foolishly*); I realized that this (*gaining as much knowledge and wisdom as is humanly possible*) also is **striving after wind**. [18] Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

1. The wisdom gained from studying philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, capitalism, socialism, communism, market economics, and political science provides some understanding of human nature, mental health, social interactions, better forms of government, economic systems that benefit the most people possible, and what is required for national or international peace. Yet for all that has been learned, none of these studies **have**

produced a society or a world free from the destructive ills of poverty, injustice, hatred, discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, the abuse of power, and greed.

2. In addition, for those who seriously pursue such studies, the more educated, discerning, and wise they become the more sadness and pain they feel over **what is** as opposed to what can and ought to be.
3. In other words, you cannot gain the wisdom and insight to see **what ought to be** without feeling the pain of **what is** when what is includes the unloving, irresponsible, inhumane, relationship destructive, and self-destructive behavior of family members, neighbors, co-workers, church members, and government leaders.
4. Therefore, every attempt to solve mankind's relational, societal, economic, and governmental problems apart from God and a changed nature brought about by God is vanity and striving after wind. And serious growth in wisdom and insight in the ways of mankind will bring increased pain over seeing a clearer picture of the unloving, self-serving ways of people in general and specifically those in your own home, extended family, community, and nation.

C. **Ecclesiastes 2:1-11** . . . I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was **futility** (*Producing no valuable effect. True, pleasure makes me feel better for the moment or even the day, but it doesn't remove or change situations and relationships that are challenging, sad, painful, hard, or destructive. I still have to face and deal with those things once the euphoria wears off or the pleasure producing activity ends. Therefore, pleasure is futile.*).

1. **[2a] I said of laughter, "It is madness,"** (*Laughter makes me forget, or at least cushions me from feeling the painful realities of life. But it doesn't change anything, which means my troubles are the same after laughing as they were before. And so to rely on laughter to make me feel better rather than dealing responsibly with my troubles is madness, or a form of insanity.*)
2. **[2b] and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"** (*Or, how does it help me? It doesn't educate me or make me wiser or give me answers to my problems. All it does is make me feel better for a time while leaving my life just as it was before experiencing the pleasure.*)
3. **[3]** I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely (*discover how high I could get without losing my senses*), and how to take hold of folly (*how foolish I could be without doing something I'd regret*), until I could see (or

- figure out*) what [acceptable and pleasurable things are available] for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.
4. [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.
 5. [9] Then I became great (*rich, powerful, and famous*) and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me (*I became known for my wisdom, and when tested, my wisdom served me well*). [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 (*a pleased, happy heart*) was my reward for all my labor.
 6. [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. (*There was nothing of value or lasting worth or life transforming that was gained from these pursuits.*)
 7. The point here is that the pursuit of worldly pleasures, riches, power, or fame provides a form of diversion and comfort from the disappointments and pain of life, but only temporarily. The good feelings gained from striving after such things either end with the activity, or soon thereafter.
 8. Therefore, to perpetuate or regain the good feelings, you have to repeat the activity or the accomplishment, for without the repeat, whatever you gained from the activity is done and over once the activity is done and over. The drug addict or alcoholic provides an obvious example of this, yet this principle holds true for all of us who pursue such things for such reasons.

D. **Ecclesiastes 2:12-17** . . . So I turned to consider wisdom, madness (*forms of insanity*) and folly (*the state of being foolish or lacking good sense*) – [and I did this in order to see what each is like and how each effects a person's life]; for what will the man do who will come after the

king except what has already been done? (*How will the next king deal any differently with the things I have dealt with or gotten involved in?*)

1. [13] And I saw that wisdom excels (*surpasses*) folly as light excels darkness. (*And why does wisdom surpass folly? Because as we read in **Ecclesiastes 7:12**, "Wisdom is protection just as money is protection, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors."*)
2. [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 (*striving to be exceedingly knowledgeable and wise*) is vanity." [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**.
3. No matter how foolish or wise we become, or how ungodly or godly we are, death awaits us all. And in time – with but rare exception – no one living on the earth will have heard about us or even take the time to learn about us. The reality is, the day will come when no one on the earth knows or even cares if we were wise or foolish, godly or ungodly.
4. For those seeking fame or approval and acceptance, this ought to be a sobering reality, for in most cases, whatever fame we receive in this life will be, in time, forgotten, and we will be forgotten just like everyone else who dies and is forgotten.
5. But for those who no longer live for themselves, but for God and their savior, Jesus Christ, it is different. We aren't seeking to be remembered by this world, but rather to be salt and light for God's sake, and for God's honor, and for the sake of those we love, and for the sake of those who live around us. Therefore, when we die, we care not about being remembered, but rather that we hear God say "Well done, good and faithful servant" (**Matthew 25:21**).

E. **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26** . . . There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink (*be content in life*) and tell himself that his labor is good (*able to find joy in living a responsible and godly life*). This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. [25] **For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without [God]?** [26] For to a person who is good in

God's sight God 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 (*all the work the unbeliever does to better his life and find happiness and contentment*) is vanity and **striving after wind**.

1. When we desire to know God, and when we are committed to trusting God while striving to live a life pleasing to God, we find contentment, joy, wisdom, and knowledge. Or maybe we should say, these things find us as the unexpected rewards of righteousness.
2. But for the unbeliever, all their efforts at striving for contentment, joy, and wisdom are futile – for apart from God and godliness the true form of these treasures cannot be found, possessed, or enjoyed.

F. **Ecclesiastes 4:4-6** . . . I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too (*a competitiveness that compels you to outdo or be seen as better than others*) is **vanity and striving after wind**. [5] The fool (*is either too fearful of failure to become competitive or is so lazy that he doesn't do what he ought to do. And so he*) folds his hands and consumes his own flesh (*destroys himself*). [6] [Therefore,] one hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and **striving after wind**.

1. According to the world's view of success, the kind of competitor Solomon is speaking of often achieves a good amount of worldly success, and sometimes does great things. However, the goal of the competitor is to be seen by others as someone important, or to gain a sense of self-worth and well-being.
2. Yet gaining such things for these reasons is shallow and temporary. Besides, people are fickle, which means the competitor has to keep on striving, harder and harder, to continue being seen as important and to continue feeling good about himself.
3. Therefore, it is best to balance striving and rest, work and the contemplation of spiritual, moral, and eternal things so that you live a life pleasing to God, and in so doing gain from God a humble sense of importance, self-worth, and well-being .

G. This last “**striving after wind**” statement is a difficult statement to make sense of or understand its true meaning. I make no claim to have the right understanding, but today I will use my understanding to make the point I think Solomon is making. You may see it differently, and your “different” may be better or closer to being right than my way.

Nevertheless, here is my best effort at making sense of this seventh statement.

1. **Ecclesiastes 4:13-16** . . . A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. [14] For he (*the poor yet wise lad*) has come out of prison (*possibly debtor's prison*) to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. [15] I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad (*the poor yet wise lad*) who replaces him (*the old and foolish king*). [16] There is no end to all the people (*who supported the old and foolish king when he became king, and who now support the poor but wise lad who is taking the old king's place*), to all who were before them (*both kings at the beginning of their reign*), and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him (*just as the old king lost the people's whole-hearted support after a time, so the new young king is likely to lose the people's support for one reason or another*), for this too is vanity and **striving after wind**.
2. Gaining wisdom – even great wisdom – becomes vanity and striving after wind if we eventually allow pride or selfishness or foolishness or some other evil to lead us to live contrary to the wisdom we have.
3. In other words, starting great is good and commendable! Yet giving way to foolishness and ungodliness so as to end poorly is to be as foolish and have as worthless a life as the one who is foolish and ungodly his whole life.
4. Peter addressed this truth in **2 Peter 2:20-22**, “For if, after we have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state (*the state of being entangled and overcome by evil*) has become worse for us than the first. [21] For it would be better for us not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to us. [22] It has happened to us according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’”

III. Conclusion

- A. Godly wisdom comes from God, and He says the wisest way to live is to “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (**Matthew 6:33**)