

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 1 week study of the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (Song of Solomon)

The story so far: This week we look at two more of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, often attributed to Solomon.

Ecclesiastes seems out of harmony with many of the Biblical themes we are most familiar with. Certain themes in Ecclesiastes are played over and over again like a depressing chorus: Everything is useless; nothing is permanent; the world makes no sense and God is beyond our understanding; the only wise thing to do is enjoy what you have while you have it because it will all soon be gone. Not exactly an uplifting take on life. Perhaps Ecclesiastes' value is much the same as that of the lament psalms we discussed in week 19...Ecclesiastes puts words to the very real sense of hopelessness and absurdity we all feel at times. Before we can acknowledge the loving presence of God we sometimes must first be able to name the dark and unpleasant feelings we have.

Song of Songs Also known as the Song of Solomon, this book is structured as poetry with stanzas spoken by characters known as the Beloved (the woman), the Lover (the man), and Friends. The language used, especially in terms of its description of the joys of physical and emotional love, is bold and explicit giving rise over the centuries to a certain discomfort on the part of the church with its presence in the Bible. The result has often been an allegorical interpretation which has argued that the book is really speaking of the love between God and Israel or the Lord and the church. In truth, however, any discomfort notwithstanding, the Song should be understood as a celebration of love as one of God's good and many gifts. The two lovers presented in this poem are committed and mutual in their relationship, rejoicing in each other.

Monday:

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, 2:1-11

What to look for:

- The word translated "meaningless" in 1:2 has as its root meaning "vapor". In other words, emptiness, what's left after a soap bubble bursts. "Meaningless" is when everything is totaled up and the bottom line is still zero.
- The Teacher spent a life-time trying everything, all the normal paths to self-fulfillment and had come up empty. The modern equivalent might be: "Been there. Done that."
- How do you measure success? How does your yardstick compare to that of the Teacher's?

Tuesday:

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-17

What to look for:

- Note vs. 10-11. This is the heart of the chapter and the key to the Teacher's struggle. God has created humanity to long for something more than the pursuit of pleasure, something more significant than what this life alone can provide. Life doesn't make sense apart from God. Nor

will we ever gain a full understanding of the meaning of life – at least not in this life – because we cannot fathom what God has done...we are not God. Though he knows there is a time for everything, he does not know how it all ends. And not knowing is the source of his frustration – and often ours.

- In what way does this passage suggest that despite the way in which life can seem pointless, the Teacher still recognizes that God is in control?

Wednesday:

Read Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13-14

What to look for:

- The conclusion the Teacher reaches at the end of his reflections (vs. 13-14) echo the same thought we ran into last week in Proverbs (Proverbs 1:7), that life, like wisdom, makes no sense and has no meaning apart from God.
- Here, finally, is our fulfillment – something much more than “meaningless”. Once we realize that creating our own meaning in life is beyond our abilities, we can allow God to be that meaning for us, and learn to enjoy the simple living of life.

Thursday:

Read Song of Songs 2:1-17

What to look for:

- (vs.4) The banner being referred to here was a military insignia that was held high to keep everyone in the unit connected. This visible sign became the point by which those in the battle rallied themselves.
- How might you help the person with whom you are in relationship feel loved and accepted today?
- Note vs 10-13...if the Song were to be read as an allegory, how might these verses remind one of Jesus and the promise of heaven? Would it surprise you to know Pastor Joe has used this verse in funeral sermons?

Friday:

Read Song of Songs 8:6-7

What to look for:

- The song speaks of love in powerful, sweeping terms. Often times, however, it is not major obstacles that deal love a death blow, but the small, imperceptible changes to which we grow accustomed and the carelessness with which we treat it.
- In what areas have you banked the fires in your relationship with the one you love?

Next week - back to the story.