

SENSE OF FUTILITY LEADS TO LUSTY WORK ETHIC

“All is vanity!” sounds like a contemporary complaint. So it’s to the credit of a Jewish wise man writing well over 2,000 years ago that his ancient verdict translates so easily into a modern gripe.

The complaint runs like a tiresome refrain through the paragraphs of Ecclesiastes. This book of the Bible is also called “Qoheleth,” which is often mistranslated as “the Preacher.” But the insights of this wisdom tract are quite unlike what most people hear from their preachers.

On the one hand, he had very little good to say about anything he had experienced. On the other hand, that negative assessment did not lead to despair, but to a lusty enjoyment of life and work.

A quick reading of the ten or so pages of this book of the Jewish scriptures will expose both sides of Qoheleth’s argument.

He tried everything. He used his royal wealth to taste every kind of mad pleasure—wine, women, and song. When those delights petered out, he settled down to become a scholar and pursued wisdom with a vengeance. Then he turned to work, thinking that there must be some satisfaction in a job well done.

He investigated the merits of political justice. He checked out the rewards of God-pleasing worship. And he toyed with suggesting that longevity is the highest good.

But when all is said and done, you end dead, friend. So from that perspective no one is better off than anyone else.

Rich or poor, wise or foolish, industrious or lazy, fair or foul, pious or irreligious, long- or short-lived—all eventually drop dead. And their accomplishments—like their failures—add up to zero.

“Everything is vanity,” grouched Qoheleth. “All is emptiness. It’s like trying to catch the wind.” If he reached that sour conclusion once, he repeated the line two dozen times.

Now it’s time to drop the other shoe. If life is as bad as all that, if there’s no reasonable goal for living, what then?

Two alternatives suggest themselves. One answer points to despair: If there’s no purpose in living, you might as well turn on the gas and end it all. At least that way you can avoid a lot of ugliness and disappointment.

The other alternative advises an “anything goes” attitude: If there’s no moral structure to the universe, you might as well do what you want, no holds barred. You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can get, and devil take the hindmost.

Qoheleth, however, wasn’t buying either of those. He didn’t slit his throat in despair, nor did he opt for moral delinquency. He offered a third choice, a kind of robust work ethic.

Ecclesiastes 2:24 is a good example. At the end of his first depressing survey of life’s possibilities Qoheleth concludes with this upbeat note: “There’s nothing better for a man than to eat and drink, and to find some satisfaction in his job.” The same encouraging thought is repeated half a dozen times

Remember that in ancient times a man’s job was passed down from father to son. The family trade was the hinge on which their lives swung.

So the best approach to living, suggests Qoheleth, is to enjoy what you have as best you can. If you can keep your stomach full and find some satisfaction in your daily work, what more could you want?

What a treat it is to read a 2300-year-old pamphlet like Ecclesiastes and find such a contemporary insight. Its assessment of the world scene is as pessimistic as anything on the front page of your daily newspaper.

Yet in the face of what could be unbearably depressing, it suggests a thumbs-up approach to life. Everything is vanity, as empty as vapor. So enjoy living as best you can, especially by plying your trade.