

Making sanity out of vanity

Christian realism
in the book of Ecclesiastes

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*For they themselves report
concerning us the kind of reception
we had among you,
and how you turned to God from idols
to serve the living and true God
(1 Thessalonians 1:9).*

Foreword

Books from pastors are the best. Pastors handle Scripture carefully, they know us, their affection for people is easy to see, and they know how to make Scripture come to life. That is an unbeatable combination.

Stan Gale is a pastor. He preaches to people he loves every week. Yes, behind his preaching and writing is careful work in the biblical text. He is a devoted student of Scripture. But don't expect those details to be flaunted in this wonderful exploration of Ecclesiastes. Instead, expect a friend — the perfect tour guide — as you look at life 'under the sun'. He will speak *with* you, not *to* you, and certainly not *at* you.

Whatever he tackles is, I believe, worthwhile. I understand he has been preaching through the Minor Prophets, and, if he chooses to write something on those books, I will be sure to read it; but his choice of Ecclesiastes, I believe, is especially timely.

Somehow there is a myth floating around that when you follow Jesus, life has certain tangible perks. When your Father is God and Jesus is the reigning King, you expect that finances won't be quite as tight, relationships will be easier, and life will be a bit merrier. I remember a Christian movie from the 1960s in which I am sure that the main character got better looking once he became serious about Jesus. It was just a little bit of false advertising, provoking seemingly innocent expectations.

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Yet these beliefs are far from innocent. When you expect wine and roses and end up with gruel, your confidence in the Lord wanes. Maybe, you wonder, this relationship with Christ is just like a life insurance policy after all. It is good for when you die, but costly while you live. Life insurance policies are boring, at best. Maybe the Bible has no real-world application.

And what about the many men and women who jettison their faith because they encounter suffering — lots of suffering — and following Christ seems to make absolutely no difference? They have been spared nothing. There is a rule in suffering: the more intense the suffering, the more alone you feel from both other people and the Lord. There are times when life is a painful mess, and if God doesn't speak to us in the midst of that mess, why bother?

In Ecclesiastes, God speaks into the mess. Ecclesiastes is not about happy thoughts that deny earthly realities. Instead, the Preacher, along with the other voice we hear in Ecclesiastes, open our eyes even wider than normal. They take us to all the difficult places. They hear our questions and run further with them until all is laid bare. Every once in a while you might think that Ecclesiastes is written by a dour existentialist, but, somehow, even before you get to the end of the book, you can tell that this examination of life will end in hope, and result in more meaning and fulness than we can comprehend.

At the end of Stan's time with you in Ecclesiastes, you won't have a formula for wealth, wisdom or beauty, but you will find comfort, hope and meaning as you know your God is worthy of your complete trust.

Full disclosure. There is another perspective I have on this book that makes it even richer. I happen to know the children who appear in the dedication. They are Stan's grandchildren. Three of them are my grandchildren too. What a comfort it is for me to know that when they are at Pop Pop's house they will be led in this eyes-wide-open wisdom that ultimately not only comes from Jesus Christ but *is* Christ.

*[Wisdom] has sent out her young women to call
from the highest places in the town,
'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!'
To him who lacks sense she says,
'Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.'*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

*The woman Folly is loud;
she is seductive and knows nothing.
She sits at the door of her house;
she takes a seat on the highest places of the town,
calling to those who pass by,
who are going straight on their way,*

*'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!'
And to him who lacks sense she says,
 'Stolen water is sweet,
 and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.'*
*But he does not know that the dead are there,
 that her guests are in the depths of Sheol*
(Proverbs 9:3-6, 10, 13-18).

1.

Vanity Fair

Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair: it is kept all the year long. It beareth the name of Vanity Fair because the town where it is kept is lighter than vanity; and, also because all that is there sold, or that cometh thither, is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, 'all that cometh is vanity.'

This fair is no new-erected business, but a thing of ancient standing; I will show you the original of it.

Almost five thousand years ago, there were pilgrims walking to the Celestial City, as these two honest persons are; and Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, with their companions, perceiving by the path that the pilgrims made, that their way to the city lay through this town of Vanity, they contrived here to set up a fair; a fair, wherein should be sold all sorts of vanity, and that it should last all the year long; therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not

(Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*).

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In his classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan escorts us to Vanity Fair. The Fair, he says, is open for business year round. And it's not a new business, but was established from ancient times. The Fair offers all the wares and services typical to mankind, some inherently dishonourable, some not. But all the offerings share a common description — they are vanity.

This sounds like a page right out of Ecclesiastes.

And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun

(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

We all agree that work is good in God's eyes, don't we? How then can it find a place in Vanity Fair among 'lusts, blood and bawds'? Marriage, money and homes are good things, aren't they? How is it they are listed by Bunyan on the directory of marketplaces of Vanity Fair? Like 'gentlemen's clubs' and 'exotic dancers', we can understand how undesirables and depravities set up shop in the Fair and attract those like them. But children and possessions! — What place do they have among the unsavoury and immoral?

The point is that even that which is good and noble can be corrupted and misused. The knife that saves life on the surgeon's table can be used to take it by the hand of rage. Family is a good thing, a blessing of God to be protected and nurtured. Yet when family becomes an end in itself, a substitute for God, it then finds its place in the aisles of Vanity Fair.

Who is the proprietor of Vanity Fair? Bunyan identifies a partnership of Beelzebub, Apollyon and Legion. These three

Vanity Fair

are one, a sampling of names given in the Bible, identified for us by God as the prince of this fallen world, the god of this age, whose goal it is to prompt us to indulge in that which is false, having an appearance of worthiness, even godliness, but is a vain offering, devoid of power for life.

We find Satan's first sales pitch at the dawn of humanity amidst the backdrop to which we referred earlier.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'

(Genesis 3:1-5).

The devil hawks a vain thing, something appealing to the senses, even sensible to the independent mind, but empty of promise and destructive to life, a placebo at best, a poison at worst.

A similar theme and call for discernment of 'buyer beware' echoes throughout the pages of Holy Writ. Psalm 1 enjoins us to distinguish between competing counsel of wisdom and folly, displaying for us the lot of each path. Proverbs 9 records the invitations of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly, both situated by the way, both appealing to those who seek sense amidst the vanity of life, yet each leading to its own end, wisdom to richness of life, folly to death itself: 'But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths

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of Sheol' (Prov. 9:18). There is a way that seems right to a man, the proverb cautions us, but its end is the way of death. Like grocery shopping on an empty stomach, we need to be guarded and discerning in our purchases, knowing the folly to which we are prone.

The theme of discernment for those living in the midst of Vanity Fair continues in the New Testament, from Jesus' caution in Matthew 7:24-27, urging us to be careful where we build our house, to the sobering words of the apostle Paul:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ

(Colossians 2:6-8).

Perhaps no better passage lays it on the line for us in the face of the lures of Vanity Fair than God's words through the prophet Isaiah.

'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David'

(Isaiah 55:1-3).

Vanity Fair

The lines of communication to which we are to listen run throughout Scripture, taking us to the highpoint of the Mount of Transfiguration: ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’ (Matt. 17:5).

The market of Vanity Fair may offer milk and bread but its calories are empty and nutrients non-existent. Against the din of Satan’s incessant shouts urging us to enter the shop and spend the currency of our labours according to the acumen of our own assessments, the counsel of God directs us to listen to him, eat what is good, delight ourselves in what will truly satisfy and find life itself, ultimately through his covenant faithfulness realized in the Son of David, in whom is bound the wisdom of God.

It should be apparent by now that Vanity Fair is spread before us ‘under the sun’, its wares a vain offering, ‘lighter than vanity’, as Bunyan puts it; expressed by the Preacher as ‘vanity of vanities’, the emptiest of empties. Ecclesiastes escorts us through the aisles of Vanity Fair, pointing us as a tour guide through a marketplace of alleged answers to life, means to fulfilment, escapes from the angst of a frustrating life, which fill the shelves waiting for purchase. But, as a father taking his child by the hand, our God takes our hand in his to guide us through the shams and scams of life under the sun with the goal of finding life, hope, meaning and purpose in him, arrived at through heeding his words recorded in Isaiah that we listen intently to him.

In this tour conducted by Ecclesiastes we are exposed to virtually every area of life in which we might seek to find sense and significance at the behest of the hawkers of Vanity Fair: family, friends, money, possessions, sex, entertainment, education, status, religion, social causes, physical fitness and beauty. Throughout, Ecclesiastes alerts us to the folly and shows us how to reclaim life from the vanity under the sun that we might be kept from striving after wind, and instead may find where our life and labour are not in vain.

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Questions from Qoheleth

1. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, where was Vanity Fair held? What do you think lies behind that name? Why would Bunyan speak of a fair being there? What do you notice about this fair? What parallels can you draw between the town and its fair and the world in which we live?
2. Who are the proprietors of Vanity Fair? What does the New Testament's background check tell us about this management team (e.g., John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 2:1-3; 1 Peter 5:8; Rev. 2:9)? Why should this put us on guard in the course of life? To what should we particularly be on the alert?
3. How can the Bible itself be found in the library of Vanity Fair? How do we improperly use the Bible? Why are Christians sometimes charged with 'bibliolatry'? How does the devil twist God's Word in Genesis 3:1-5 and Matthew 4:1-10?
4. How can something take the place of God in our lives? What does that look like in practical terms?
5. What are examples of things or activities that are not bad in themselves but can be corrupted and misused? How is the fruit of the tree in Genesis 2:17 an example of this?
6. Read Proverbs 9, verses 4 and 16. What is the appeal? To whom is it made? Who is making the appeals? What are the consequences of listening to and following each appeal in Proverbs 9:6 and 9:18? How does this relate to life for us in this world of Vanity Fair?
7. What two ways are contrasted in Psalm 1? In Colossians 2:6-8? In Isaiah 55:1-3? How does Ecclesiastes present the same contrast?
8. Knowing we live in a world filled with counterfeit offerings, what is our need (see Prov. 17:24)? How relevant is Psalm 119:33-40 as a daily prayer in this need?
9. What offerings of Vanity Fair do you think you may have bought into? What is God calling you to do with them? How does Ephesians 4:17-24 instruct you to follow God's call?

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

*In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

*Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.*

*It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones*

(Proverbs 3:5-8).