

# Under the Sun

by W.J. Erdman

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*The sermon explores the natural man's perspective on life, death, and judgment, highlighting his limited vision and lack of understanding of God's wisdom and redemption.*

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 9:5

**Topics:** "Ecclesiastes Commentary", "Mortality And Faith"

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## Description

W.J. Erdman preaches on the perspective of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, emphasizing the focus on earthly life 'under the sun' and the natural man's absorption with present labor and enjoyment. The Preacher's reluctance towards death stems from the desire to continue experiencing earthly pleasures and pursuits, rather than concerns about judgment or the afterlife. Despite glimpses of future judgment, the Preacher's main lament is the lack of profit, portion, and remembrance after death, highlighting a longing for immortality and a deep attachment to life 'under the sun.' The sermon explores how the Preacher's worldview contrasts with the faith and hope in God's goodness and salvation displayed by biblical figures like Job, Hezekiah, and Asaph.

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## Transcript

The oft repeated, significant "Under the Sun," is a proof that the Preacher has in his eye man as man; even fallen, ignorant sons of Adam, unredeemed and unrenewed.

The whole action and movement is thoroughly horizontal.

There are serious glances towards the heavens, and melancholy looks towards the underworld, but the main thought has to do with the present earthly life. The word "grave" is not even mentioned. It is found in the English Version but once, and there it stands for Sheol. Somehow the natural man would speak of all the unseen with bated breath, and then in moods of brooding melancholy. So thoroughly absorbing is this thought of life under the sun, that the reason for quarreling with death is that it not only ends the present labor and enjoyment, but it also prevents one from knowing what is going on in the busy scheming world after one is gone; "who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him?" He is not curious to know what may be after death in the under world, but what shall be after him in this world. All "under the sun," and only that, interests him; the sigh of vain regret is thoroughly of the natural man; the other world is far away and the thought of it unwelcome and troubling. His consciousness is of the world "under heaven;" he would none of the other; human affairs, not divine, alone engross him.

The unwillingness to meet death is not because of a judgment after death, but because death cuts off all joys of earth and time, and shortens life far too much, especially for the "wise man." He, at least, would like to enjoy long life, but it is no more for him than for the fool. Fame after death might satisfy, but alas! there is no remembrance forever; he will never know whether men speak of him after he is gone.

The thought of future judgment does at times cloud the prospect, but only for a moment. Its fear is all negative. And, of all things, the Preacher is not debating the question of "annihilation" or "conditional immortality." Such question is an intrusion of modern thought and theory into the passages concerning death as an event coming alike to all; and surely, the Preacher's words would thereby involve also the good and righteous in the common fate of annihilation. On the contrary, it is the continuity of life "under the sun," he has always in mind and heart; and the deprivation of all "under the sun" by death, is what he so sadly deplores. He bewails the fact that there is no "profit" under the sun; no "portion," except in the present; no remembrance after death. He would lay up goods for his soul to enjoy here many years; and he would fain go far to find "the fountain of immortal youth." He longs to live on and on, and not pass as a shadow.

While all this longing seems to be the same as the desire of the people of God who delighted in the promise of long life, it is, when narrowly examined, something altogether different.

The well-known desire of patriarch and psalmist "to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living," and to abide on earth many years, is found, indeed, in Ecclesiastes, but in a perverted form. They prayed for it in order "to walk before Jehovah," and to have Jehovah for their "portion in the land of the living;" but the natural man would live under the sun and find his "portion" in the good things of his labor and toil, and thinks of God, even in his moments of thankful enjoyment, with foreboding fear.

The hesitance and dread to go down to Sheol and its gloom and oblivion, confessed by a Job, and a Hezekiah, and a Heman the Ezrahite, is verily echoed in the melancholy complaints of the Preacher so vainly-wise under the sun; but great is the difference of the motive.

They knew that in Sheol no songs of redemption could be sung, no cheerful praise of Jehovah would be heard, as in the land of the living; a time of waiting for the great Redeemer would have begun; but in this book of men under the heavens, the contention with death is that it cuts off all pleasures and pursuit of riches forever. If men could only keep on living here, there might possibly be some "profit" at last in living, for Jehovah is not their portion here or hereafter.

A Job went down to the grave knowing he would live again and see his Redeemer in the latter day; and the Ezrahite in the very pit of darkness still called upon Jehovah as the "God of his salvation" and an Asaph could sing:

"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, And afterwards receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

But this seeker after the unknown good guides his heart only with natural wisdom; and when flesh and heart fail, sighs out, "Vanity of vanities, the Whole is Vanity." He knows nothing of meeting a Redeemer and Saviour in God at last; but looks for a Judge, righteous and wrathful, whose fear made life often darksome and sad, except in transient moods of complacent enjoyment.

In brief, this strange transcript of what man is and does and thinks under the sun, seems to be held forth to men to show how near the natural man may come to high and holy realities and not see them, how limited his vision when looking before and after, and how, having compassed sea and land for an answer to his great perplexing questions, he only knows that all must die and meet God in judgment and give account of their days and works of vanity. Over and over again the preacher speaks of evil and only evil; he sees it which ever way he looks, but he never hints of deliverance from it through the Redeemer.

His very Proverbs are but the naturalistic echoes of the parables and sayings of the divine wisdom in the Book of Proverbs; they are not related to Jehovah as the God of revelation and redemption, they are not environed and permeated by the sense and fact of a blessed fellowship with God on the ground of redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; and though at times exactly like the proverbs of the wise man who loves the Lord, they are used by the worldly-wise man as by one who dislikes to think of God. And most note worthy is it that while the " fool " (kesil) of the Book of Proverbs is generally the impious, Ungodly man, the fool of Ecclesiastes under the same name is only the ignorant, improvident, wordy, loud-mouthed, self-conceited man. In Proverbs his folly is viewed in its final relations to the divine and holy, in Ecclesiastes with but one and that hardly an exception, to the earthly and worldly. The dislike of the fool -- that is his kind of a fool -- is carried so far by " the Preacher " that he uses also another name (sakal) for him, one found only in this book, and designating the thick headed fellow, ignorant of worldly affairs, who would not know how to manage a fortune that might be left him, and who tells every one walking in the way that he is a fool, and does things which the man of the world knows enough to avoid as not being " in good form." The kindred word " thick-headedness " is the only one used in this book for " folly " or " foolishness," except one, while in Proverbs other words are used, this never; all proving the conceit and contempt of the wise man of the world, who cannot abide the dull and the stupid. Though the use of this word is not confined to this meaning, it gives the flavor and tone of all its uses as essentially of the world " under the sun." But the Preacher, when he has arrived at his later and more composed state of mind, seems to forget that what he at one time had himself said, he now blames the wordy blockhead for saying, " A man cannot tell what shall be, and what shall be after him, who can tell him?" Still, in the prologue he retains it.

In brief, in all these proverbs of prudence there is a flavor and hint of the world of men, busy and self-seeking, distracted and disappointed. God is but rarely related to His wisdom; and as to fools, God is likely to be angry with shallow-pates who bow and do not pay; "He hath no pleasure in fools."

On many matters familiar to Israel, there seems to be an intentional withholding of all reference or mention.

The great over-arching mystery of the work and purpose of God, so perplexing to this "Preacher" in his natural wisdom, is not altogether concealed in the earliest writings of inspiration. Such mystery had already been in part revealed, in promise and prophecy, in history and triumphal song, and in many psalms of David, the father of the wisest of men; but in this book of man under the sun, it seems to be understood that all to be known on this question must be what natural reason can discover. It is, however, to be pondered in an environment of the knowledge and worship of the one living and true God. It is man "under the heaven " who is put to the test. He expresses admiration and delight on beholding the orderly course of the " times," each beautiful in its season, but he is perplexed and wearied by his ignorance of the purpose and goal of all, whereas every Hebrew did know, even from earliest times, that all things, all times and events, were related to the promise and the preparation and final fulfillment of a divine redemption and a universal, eternal Kingdom of God.

There is also lack of allusion to the rites and ceremonies of Israel. The book must be wholly written as of the natural man; and especially as of man no longer a worshipper of idols, but of a day as modern as our own.

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