

# Vanity of Vanities vs. Greatest Worth on Earth

Eccles. 1:1-14, Rom. 8:18-21, Psalm 143

*David C. Dixon*

**Introduction:** So how does the last day of the year affect you? Are you anticipating a great New Year's party? Thinking about how you'll make ends meet in the new year? Or is your heart overflowing with nostalgia or a sense of futility? In Psalm 39, King David is experiencing those feelings as he contemplates the brevity of his life: *"Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone's life is but a breath. Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom; in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be. But now, O Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you."* Amen, may it be so with us as well!

No wonder David's son, the preacher of Ecclesiastes, writes both stoically and passionately about his weariness from searching for significance and meaning in human existence, and not being able to find anything but vanity! All seems destined for the sameness of what has been before, and no genuine "newness" can be found anywhere under the sun. Both in nature and in human experience the patterns seem exactly the same. Solomon's conclusion: *"I, the Convener of the assembly, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are vanity,\* a striving after the wind."* [\*Hebrew *hevel*, a mist or vapor]. The King saw how most people's daily time and energy was spent on things that are totally empty of lasting value or meaning.

But instead of moving us to search out the reason for our existence and how we can employ our time coming to know our Maker, this very vanity is what drives many to seek entertainment and diversion in ever stronger doses and sensations, and in more extreme stimuli that can lead to addictions and many other destructive behaviors. We humans can indeed be rather "boring" at times in terms of our repetitive cycles of behavior ("same old same old," we say), because we're so predictable in tripping over the same stone again and again without learning our lesson.

**1)** This is why I'm convinced that the end of the year at least brings us face to face with the fact that **we were here at this same place last year**, and have we made any progress? At least those with faith in Christ should interpret that question in terms of, "Have I become any more Christlike? Do I love God more passionately? Am I learning to love my neighbor as myself? Practically, realistically? Am I becoming more generous, compassionate, patient, long-suffering? Am I facing life's uncertainties with more faith and confidence in the Lord?" The end of the year speaks to us eloquently about our deep **need for spiritual renewal**. What spiritual resources and hope do you have as you look out on the challenges of 2024? Already beset with wars and rumors of wars, already operating deep in the red with mountains of financial debt, already plagued with countless barriers of separation

and prejudice. We received a sweet Christmas note from our middle son recently, a portion of which I asked permission to share with you: as he reflected on his situation and ours, he said, *“Sometimes I just despair when I look at the state of the world that my children will be growing up in. I guess that’s why we need Christmas so much. It’s a struggle to not just want to give up ...”* Those two phrases really caught my attention as a temptation that all of us may face as we look out on the new year: “despair” – ever feel that looking out on this world? “A struggle not to give up” – that ever cross your mind? Strong temptations, but Joel went on to affirm his weapons for combatting them, listing the reasons he would not get stuck in despair or give up. They had everything to do with faith, the wife and family God gave him, the beauty of God’s creation, the new creation we’re part of, Immanuel! That’s solid biblical reasoning!

**2)** Ruth Haley Barton (founder of Transforming Center for Spiritual Leadership) writes: *“We are made for more. More of God than we have right now. More peace, more joy, more love. Deeper levels of wisdom and discernment. True transformation and life change. Whether we can fully articulate it or not, on some level we know we’re made for more and we are wired to keep seeking it.”* Does this resonate with you? Do you recognize this need in yourself? To keep growing (“so many areas where I need to improve and mature”)! Are you wired to keep seeking that deeper relationship with the Lord? (“getting my priorities aligned with His!”) But to get there, we have to face the truth of *where we are!* Is this you a lot of the time – just barely hanging in there? No time or energy left to devote to “soul transformation”? In order to grow beyond where we are toward real soul transformation, we have to be aware of the obstacles, the discouragements, the shortcomings (the sin that so easily besets us, Heb. 12), our brokenness, the hole in my soul. Whatever is unhealthy, unresolved, or dysfunctional within you will inevitably find its way into your relationships (family, work, life projects), and it contaminates. Hope for the future, given our brokenness, has everything to do with your motivation and your vision of life. How do you envision the future? And what motivates you to embrace it? Scripture had better be your first resource for answering these questions: make it happen! (instead of just counting on Google or youtube, self-help philosophies, popular culture, etc.)

**3)** Let’s look at two passages that speak to these questions: first, from the apostle Paul; second, from King David. In Romans 8:18-21, the apostle Paul takes note of the groaning of creation – our temporality, subject to wear and tear, and our bondage to corruption and decay that characterizes all the created order; then he contrasts this with the spiritual freedom of the children of God and their future hope for full redemption. Let’s focus on this passage for a moment: *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* [This is a *vision for the future*, so we need to pay attention!] And what is that glory yet to be revealed in us? Paul says that it’s *“Christ in you, the hope of glory!”* (Col. 1:27). You’re either headed toward this, the greatest worth on earth, or you’re headed toward the glory of the dust, the grass that withers, the flower that fades! Which do you want your life to reflect?! And do you connect Christ’s glory with anything in particular? Of course, the cross, where Jesus had asked the Father to glorify Him so that He could glorify the Father (Jn. 17). And what would Jesus reveal about the Father at the cross? Ex. 34:6 tells about when God made His glory pass by in front of Moses and it wasn’t just the brilliant light show that caused God to hide Moses in the cleft of the rock; it was the revelation of God’s character: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, great in lovingkindness and truth! This is the glory that will be revealed in us!

V. 19: *“For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.”* And why aren’t the children of God revealed yet? Are we invisible? To the rest of the world, we’re just another crazy sect – they don’t see us as children of God, except in some generic sense the way everybody else is, because until Christ is revealed, we are hidden in Him, called to do His work in His name, without calling attention to ourselves, but only pointing to Him! *“For the creation was subjected to frustration (mataiōtes = vanity), not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and*

***brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.***” In Christ we already have this glorious freedom in the Spirit to act according to Jesus’ grace and truth – to fulfill God’s purpose and calling for our existence (no matter what the obstacles)! – and God has projected the day when all creation will be restored to that freedom to fulfill its purpose! And meanwhile, Paul reminds us of this because God has already given us the victory through Jesus our Lord: ***“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain”*** (1 Cor. 15:58). Paul’s teaching on this point reminds me of a small poem by British cricketer and missionary to China, C.T. Studd: ***“Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last”*** – a thought that puts everything in perspective!

So stay with me a moment longer while we think about how King David dealt with the temptation to get stuck in despair or to give up in the midst of his struggles. His psalms are so full of exercises in emotional intelligence, that we should be reading them every day of the new year! In Ps. 143, he’s mulling over his stressors, his anguish, his weaknesses and vulnerability, and he begins to cry out to God in a way that is intentional and exemplary for us as we face a new year with all its uncertainties:

***“<sup>6</sup> I spread out my hands to you; I thirst for you like a parched land.<sup>7</sup> Answer me quickly, O YHWH, for my spirit faints with longing. Do not hide your face from me lest I be like those who go down to the pit.<sup>8</sup> Let me hear in the morning of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.<sup>9</sup> Rescue me from my enemies, O YHWH, for I hide myself in you [take shelter in you].<sup>10</sup> Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.<sup>11</sup> For your name’s sake, O YHWH, preserve [sustain, revive] my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.<sup>12</sup> In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all that afflicts me, for I am your servant.”***

Four observations regarding David’s strategies:

- a)** He worships and thirsts for God (v. 6), calling out to Him by name (vv. 7,9,11).
- b)** He verbalizes both his fears (v. 7) and his trust in God (vv. 8-10, confession).
- c)** He rehearses his need for God’s guidance and protection (vv. 8-12).
- d)** He identifies with Yahweh as the source of his life, hope, and deliverance (vv. 11-12).