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# Ecclesiastes and the Subversion of Success

John Kendall

One of the wonders of biblical faith is the doctrine of Creation. Echoing Genesis I, Proverbs 3:19 tells us “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth. By understanding He established the heavens”. This view stands in stark contrast to many of the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East. The multiple deities of polytheism were often seen as limited by some sort of primeval matter or primeval forces. Indeed, they were often in competition with one another. From such a perspective, the world order is not, and cannot be, an ultimately stable one. Rather it is the volatile, unstable product of rival wills and opposing forces. As such it is subject to religious or magical intervention by man for his own ends. Within such a world view, the forces that shape reality can be manipulated by the use of religious or magical techniques to play off one force or god against another, in order to obtain favour or advantage in life.

The biblical view, however, is of a created cosmos, a universe ... a single, orderly reality whose structure and operation reflect the uncreated rationality, the transcendent power and the covenant faithfulness of its infinite-personal Creator. Here the underlying stability and reliability of the created order reflects God’s unity, power and faithfulness ... even His grace. Indeed, the God of the Bible is not one who is manipulated by human whim.

Speaking to the sophisticated pagans at Athens, the apostle Paul put it this way, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands, and He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else”. (Acts 17:24,25)

Nevertheless, the Bible also teaches that man and woman were created in the image of God. This further implies that human investigation into the created structure of reality is a good and proper pursuit. As made in God’s image, human beings have the ability in a finite way to ‘think God’s thoughts after Him’ and thereby glorify their Creator. In such a way, as Calvin said of astronomy, “the providence of God is thereby more fully unfolded” such that “the mind takes a loftier flight and obtains brighter views of His glory”. (Institutes 1:5:2)

Indeed, the concept of stewardship implied in Genesis 1 and 2 not only allows such activity but demands it. By study of the created order in all its aspects and by a responsible opening up of its possibilities, human dominion can truly be exercised to serve one’s neighbour and to glorify God.

Certainly, over the past thirty years or so, the influence of the Reformation's recovery of such biblical concepts has been increasingly recognised as a formative force in the early development of modern science. Such faith that the created order can be confidently studied and analysed by the human mind is reflected in the inscription over the entrance to the Cavendish laboratories in Cambridge: "The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein". (Psalms 111:2 (AV))

The biblical doctrine of Creation has profound implications ... but beyond Genesis 1 and 2 comes Genesis 3 and the reality of the Fall and the depths of human sin and rebellion.

Amongst other things, the Fall involved a loss of human dominion and power, a loss of health, wellbeing and wholeness. Because of sin, Man was cast out of the garden to face the realities of toil, pain and ultimately death ... the realities of a fallen world.

Now, human rebellion is such that, since that time, man has desperately tried to create his own reality apart from God and to overcome his loss of health, prosperity and power; to establish his own independence, his own integration of the world, his own success in manipulating it. The account of Babel in Genesis 11 provides a profound example of this. At its heart is an attempt to deny the reality, authority and relevance of God Himself and a refusal to accept His rightful verdict on human sin.

From a biblical perspective, of course, it is possible to seek to mitigate the effects of the Fall without working against God Himself. Indeed, out of love for Him and love for neighbour we are called, as His people, to be involved in the sacrificial service of others. Care for the sick and needy, relief of injustice and suffering are emphasised by both Old and New Testaments alike and have been emphasised and practised at most points in church history. This, however, is a very different approach from the utopian drive for autonomy and success that finds its roots in sinful man's fundamental rejection of God's lordship.

The following examples illustrate this dual tendency of sinful man: on one hand the recognition of some form of order in the creation (even though a distorted view of the creation) and on the other the attempt to exploit that order by use of techniques aimed at the attainment of power and the achievement of success.

### **Secular Scientism:**

Many writers have outlined the historical shift in Western thought from the Christianity of the Reformation to the deism of the Enlightenment and the atheistic naturalism of more recent times. Amidst these changes came the shift from modern science to what Francis Schaeffer called "modern modern science".

Within a Christian framework, as Hebrews 1:3 reminds us, God dynamically and actively sustains the created order moment by moment. His providential activity is such that the terms 'supernatural' or 'miracle' must not be defined as God's dynamic intervention into the created order in contrast to His usual passivity. God is as active in His providential sustaining of the universe as in miracles. The contrast is between His usual and His unusual patterns of activity. What we call natural law then basically reflects God's usual pattern of activity.

Eighteenth century deism, however, made an absolute of the usual patterns of nature. The universe was seen as a created machine, a mechanism wound up at the beginning and left to run independently of its creator. Its creator was a non-interventionist god.

It was no great step then to move beyond deism and to abolish God from the scene

altogether, to see the universe as an independent, self-contained, orderly natural system - a closed system. Within such a framework of naturalism, any basis for value, morality and hope had to be found within the world itself. For optimistic secular humanism, one of the foundations for its optimism lay in the pursuit of science.

The focus here was on the power of science to comprehend, explain and exploit the natural order. Whether through the physical, biological, human or social sciences, scientific technique was seen as the key to success, to human progress. Science was absolutised into secular scientism.

Now, although this sort of optimistic humanism has lost some of its hold over the past thirty years, it still remains a major force for many at the present time. Sir Walter Bodmer, a highly influential figure in British and international scientific circles, gave a lecture in 1989 before the ASE. Though he says much that is truly valuable in this lecture, his unspoken assumptions are reflected not only in his programmatic quotation from the deist Alexander Pope "The proper study of mankind is man" but from the very title of his lecture: "Scientific literacy for health and prosperity". In this view, human success is achieved through man's grasp of the natural order and his devising of techniques to exploit it. The title summarises in a nutshell the centre of optimistic humanism's hope.

### **Spiritual Sorcery:**

In contrast to secular scientism, there are others who claim that what is needed is insight, not merely into the natural order, but into the moral or spiritual order of reality. It is by exploitation of this order that success is achieved. We find such ideas reflected in some aspects of New Age thought, but they are also clearly present in the so-called 'faith movement' which has significant influence on churches in many parts of the world. Listen to Kenneth Copeland:

"We must understand that there are laws governing every single thing in existence. Nothing is by accident. There are laws of the world of the spirit and there are laws of the world of the natural. ... We need to realise that the spiritual world and its laws are more powerful than the physical world and its laws. Spiritual laws gave birth to physical laws. The world and the physical forces governing it were created by the power of faith - a spiritual force ... It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function .... This same rule is true in prosperity. There are certain laws governing prosperity in God's Word. Faith causes them to function ... The success formulas in the Word of God produce results when used as directed."

Dan McConnell puts it like this:

"The formulaic nature of Faith theology is based upon its world view. The world was created by God speaking the Word and calling into being everything that is. The Faith theology claims that 'God is a faith God' because he had faith that his words would bring forth creation ex nihilo ('out of nothing'). As a result, the Word is woven into the very fabric of creation. Indeed, the Word is what holds the creation together and maintains its operation. Kenyon teaches that 'faith-filled words brought the universe into being, and faith-filled words are ruling that universe today.' Following Kenyon's lead, Hagin claims that through the discovery of the 'spiritual laws' established by God to run the universe, the believer can put these laws to 'work' for his own use: 'In the spiritual realm God has set into motion certain laws, just as He set laws in the natural realm. Those laws in the natural realm work; don't they? Just as you get into contact with those natural laws or put them into practice they work for you. Over in the spiritual realm the same thing is true. I have come to the conclusion that the law of faith is spiritual law, that God has put this law into motion,

and that as surely as you come into contact with it it will work for you' .”

The ‘law of faith’ is to the spiritual realm what the law of gravity is to the physical realm. Whenever the law is set in motion, it works.

Thus, anybody, Christian or non-Christian, can plug into this universal law of faith and get ‘results’.

Again, the claim of this system is that knowledge of the order of existence, exploited by technique, brings success.

### **Systems for Success:**

At a more mundane level, finally, the twentieth century is full of systems for success. One of the all embracing values of Western Society is ‘success’, i.e. success seen usually in terms of health and wealth, freedom, power and prestige and so on. Advertising is full of images of such success in its various manifestations. There is big business in newspaper articles and books that tell us how to achieve this or that in life. People want a sure-fire way, a cast-iron formula, that will guarantee the success they desire!

A paperback recently found in the health food sections of department stores is subtitled ‘How to Avoid Ageing’. Quite frankly, the only advice it might give without breaking the British Trades Description Act would be something like “Die young!”

There is a desperate unreality here, but again such material invariably claims some insight into the way reality works and provides some technique for exploiting it.

We even see shades of all this in the Christian media. There must be literally hundreds of ‘how-to’ books and articles that claim to provide a recipe for success in everything from prayer and preaching to raising kids and running a business. The same is true in some aspects of the church growth movement. Indeed, it all has interesting theological parallels with the influential nineteenth century figure of Charles Finney and his theology of revival. “It is possible to compare the natural and spiritual realms” said Finney. “Life in nature is from God himself, but he has given the farmer the ability to plough and plant. If he does so there will be a harvest. In exactly the same way, if we make a right use of God’s means, there will be a spiritual harvest. Revival is the result of the right use of appropriate means”.

We must be careful not to make a blanket criticism of ‘how-to’ literature, whether Christian or otherwise. Much of it can be helpful because it contains true and genuine insight into the working of the world and human life. BUT, even with this, there is a danger of cultivating a ‘how-to-succeed’ mentality with a focus on technique, especially if it is based on a limited view of life or on a limited view of Scripture’s teaching.

What we end up with in all these examples is a method of achieving what we see as success; a way of taking control of our own destiny that is quite independent of the living God -the God who rightfully claims our allegiance as the Lord of life. This is so, particularly of religious or supposedly Christian theologies of success. In effect, what they tell us is that if we satisfy the right conditions, if we use the right techniques, the right spiritual principles, we can in fact manipulate God to bring about the spiritual success we desire. In its extremes, such teaching is radically self-centred and falls not far short of paganism.

### **Ancient Wisdom Literature:**

Perhaps surprisingly, these contemporary trends lead us nicely into the background of Ecclesiastes. For the ancient world had its own theologies and philosophies of success, systems that claimed to point to the true way to life. For instance, ancient Egypt and the

ancient kingdom of Edom, together with other neighbours of Israel, had their own wisdom philosophies.

A common pitfall within all the wisdom movements of the ancient Near East was the idea that limited knowledge of the way the world works could be turned into a comprehensive art to achieve success in life. Sometimes such views were very rigid and dogmatic, especially with regard to the relationship between human actions and their consequences of reward or retribution. Act in a certain way and you will gain your reward. Act in a contrary manner and you will face trouble ... In fact if you are facing trouble it must be because you have acted out of step with the principles of wisdom! Think of Job's friends in this respect.

Israel's wisdom had a radically different basis. Its first principle was the knowledge and fear of the Lord. (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33) What is primary here is not conformity to some impersonal order of reality, but conformity to a personal, moral Creator with whom man is in covenant relationship and to whom man is accountable. Israel's wisdom presupposed a doctrine of Creation and Fall (and indeed Redemption). It considered what it means for people to live in a created order disrupted by sin while not conforming to that disruption. In Proverbs, the wise man is one who rightly relates to God, to his fellow men and to the created order. The positive emphasis of Proverbs is that, even with the disruption of sin, order can still be perceived and a response made to it in daily life.

However, the simple, practical nature of a book like Proverbs can be deceptive. Since proverbial wisdom deals so much with the pragmatic side of life, it can be read selectively and misused to support what is, in effect, a success-centred, secular lifestyle that is based on a set of ready-made rules for successful living. We can easily forget that the generalised statements of proverbial wisdom are meant to stimulate thought and insight into life, rather than to provide us with a set of rigid codes of how God invariably works.

The wisdom of Proverbs, in other words, requires thought as to how its observations fit into the changing contexts of daily life. For example, Proverbs 26:4 says: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you will be like him yourself". Yet the following verse adds "Answer a fool according to his folly or he will be wise in his own eyes". Is this contradiction? No! Proverbial wisdom does not provide a set of cast-iron rules for successful living. It works on the assumption of careful thought and insight with regard to each situation.

Proverbs rejoices that there is indeed a God-given order to human life that makes wisdom possible and promotes skill in living life faithfully before God. That is its major emphasis. But it also recognises that the orderliness of the creation is sometimes very complex and hard to discern. Proverbs 30:2-4 recognises that there is a deeper order to reality than is open to mere human observation. In Job and Ecclesiastes this is made much more explicit.

### **The Contemporary Relevance of Ecclesiastes**

Ecclesiastes is not an easy book. Even our modern translations skate over some particularly knotty problems in translating (and interpreting) the Hebrew text. Perhaps the greatest difficulty for the reader is making sense of its juxtaposition of negative statements that seem to be pessimistic, sceptical, fatalistic or even cynical with statements that are much more positive, even hedonistic.

The classic liberal approach to this was to argue that an original negative, sceptical work had been modified by an orthodox editor who added positive comments of his own. Yet why an orthodox writer should reproduce a largely sceptical book at all, let alone add his

ill-fitting comments to form an incoherent work, is left unexplained!

By contrast, a respect for the book's textual integrity means that both negative and positive aspects of the book must be accounted for and the tension between them maintained, without sacrificing the unity of the work.

Against this background Ecclesiastes was written to counter any false philosophies or theologies, whether in Israel or among her neighbours, that laid claim to a comprehensive 'art of success' in life.

How does the book counter false theologies of success?

### **1. Ecclesiastes calls us to consider a realistic question:**

In its introduction at 1:3 and at repeated points in the book, it asks the question "What profit is there to life?"

This term 'profit' (Hebrew: *yithron*) is found in Biblical Hebrew only in Ecclesiastes. In later Hebrew it is used for commercial profit. Perhaps in the face of a theology of success, the book is asking, "What really is the bottom line to life?" Can one really be sure of attaining success in this life, of making a tangible profit from it?

### **2. Ecclesiastes calls us to take a realistic look at life:**

One of the main literary features of the book is its repetition of the key word translated 'vanity' or 'meaninglessness' or 'useless' in various translations. The importance of the term can be seen, not only from the fact that it is repeated thirty-eight times throughout the book, but also by comparing 1:2 with 12:8. These two verses form a literary envelope around the body of the book and underline its verdict on life ... All is vanity.

But does this mean that life is totally and utterly meaningless? We would be unwise anachronistically to read into the term all the twentieth century connotations of existential meaninglessness. If so, we would have to accept that there are not simply tensions but blatant contradictions in the book. On the other hand, we would be equally mistaken to understand this term, as much evangelical interpretation does, as a verdict on 'life under the sun', that is life when the existence of God is not taken into account, the life of the unbeliever. It may partly be that, but the fact is that in this book the verdict of 'vanity' falls on believer and unbeliever alike (for example 7:15; 9:9; 11:8,10). Indeed it is applied to everything.

Most commentators have noted repeated allusions in the book to the early chapters of Genesis. Some have suggested that the theology of Genesis 1 - 11 undergirds the book as a whole. In this light, the Hebrew word, 'hehbel', which is literally translated 'a breath' or 'a vapour', is intended to convey that which characterises life in a fallen world, life under the sun. It may not be insignificant that this same word is identical to the name given to the tragic figure of Abel in Genesis 4.

According to its context then, the word conveys something of the transience and fragility of life, its tragedy, its irony, its sorrow; something of man's inability to grasp it and find permanent satisfaction in any of its aspects; his inability to make sense of its anomalies; something of its twistedness caused by human sin. For people preoccupied with success and achievement, with power and control, whether in spiritual or secular terms, Ecclesiastes points to some tough realities ...

For example, there is a ceaseless, repetitive round to life. Ours is a world where so much toil can lead to so little reward, where pleasures are fleeting. It is a world where there is oppression and loneliness, frustration and poverty. It is a world where a great deal of

Wisdom can be destroyed by a little folly, where wealth is easily lost or squandered. Health and youth simply do not last. Old age brings on its own trials. And life is so uncertain. Bad men seem to prosper and good men do not. Sudden disaster seems to come haphazardly. And death inevitably puts an end to all earthly endeavours.

We live in a fallen world and Ecclesiastes 3:20 and 12:7 recall the words of God's sentence on man's rebellion in Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return".

This may not be God's last word, but this is a verdict that remains on life for believer and unbeliever alike. And between the boundaries of conception and death, all of us, however faithful, are subject to the possibilities of pain and poverty ... of disappointment, disaster and disease.

Despite many claims to the contrary, the Bible does not teach us otherwise, even though it does teach that God may relieve us, that He may heal us ... and that He will not desert His people. God's people are to be those who put their trust in what He has promised in His Word, not in what He has not promised.

True faith and true wisdom take a realistic look at life and what Scripture says about it. False optimistic illusions about life stem from that sinful desire to create our own autonomous reality rather than accept the responsibility to live realistically, humbly and faithfully under God's lordship, in a world that, because of human sin, is subject to vanity.

We live in a fallen world, a world in which mankind's rebellion against God has brought about a brokenness and a disorder to life. Ecclesiastes uncompromisingly calls us to face up to its harsh experience, its transience, its injustice and its seeming absurdities. Falsely optimistic philosophies of success are simply not true to reality.

In this light, the answer to the problematic question, 'What profit?' is clearly that in a fallen world there is no surplus of profit guaranteed; no tangible, measurable benefit that lasts in this order of existence (compare 2:11; 3:19; 5:11).

Yet the writer remains convinced that there is indeed a 'profit' to true wisdom (2:13; compare 7:11,12; 10:10) even though the reality of death seems to deny this. Perhaps there is just a hint here that true 'profit', the fruit of true wisdom, unlike that of false success theologies, must ultimately be of the sort that lies beyond the experience of this present world order.

### **3. Ecclesiastes calls us to hold a realistic view of God:**

The tendency of theologies of success is to have a view of God which is too man-centred. In such views the God of the Bible suffers from theological shrinkage. He becomes domesticated. to human desires. Even the amazing intimacy a believer can have with God degenerates into irreverent familiarity or exaggerated claims as to how Hei., working in our lives or in the lives of others. If we are in danger of this! Ecclesiastes should bring us up short: "I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end ... I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere Him." (Ecc 3:10,11,14). "When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labour on earth - his eyes not seeing sleep day or night - then I saw all that God has done. No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really

comprehend it.” (Ecc 8:16,17)

The God of Scripture is transcendentally sovereign. He is both wholly and utterly good and all-powerful. But His ways of working in the world are far beyond human ability to grasp. And He is certainly not captive to human decision or swayed by human manipulation.

Sadly, brash claims to certainty about God’s will in this or that matter, claims that are not based on God’s Word, often come to grief and proud illusions of special insight into God’s secret counsels are shattered. The fact is that believers are called to walk by faith not by sight. While there are solid grounds for belief in the truth of Christianity, its day by day experience involves trusting God where we cannot see. His guidance of our lives is not a puzzle for us to solve but a promise for us to trust. We are called to diligent prayer, to faithful obedience to God’s revealed will in Scripture, feeding on it and meditating prayerfully how to apply it to the situations we face. But as for the rest God is transcendentally sovereign; and in His wisdom He has hidden from us almost everything that we might like to know about His providential purposes in our lives or in our churches or in the world. “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what He has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future”. (Ecc 7:13,14) // As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things”. (Ecc 11 :5)

We live then in a fallen world where evil abounds and there is so much suffering and confusion. We have a God who is good, yet so transcendentally sovereign that we have only limited knowledge of how and why He works in the world. Both these facts deal a death blow to falsely optimistic philosophies and theologies of success - but they also leave a problem for the believer. My experience of a fallen world can call into question my trust in the providence of God, His goodness or His sovereignty.

There is no such problem in this respect for the consistent atheist - why should the world be other than it is? Nor is there a problem for the polytheist – what else can you expect from a chaos of rival gods? But for the one who trusts in the one, good, sovereign God, the experience of life in a broken world can be an enigma.

In calling for a realistic view of God and a realistic look at life, Ecclesiastes points to a tension that necessarily exists between theology and experience, between faith and sight in an abnormal world. The book then calls its readers to recognize the limitations, the evils, the confusions and the sufferings that humanity must face in a disordered creation; yet it simultaneously affirms faith in God’s goodness and His mysterious providential ordering of all things. Both sides are held in a realistic and creative tension which resists collapse into over-simplistic views of God’s character and activity on the one hand or over-simplistic views of the tragedy of human experience on the other. This tension is an uncomfortable one to live with but it is one of consummate realism.

#### **4. Ecclesiastes calls us to make a realistic response: a response of joy, enterprise and accountability:**

The facts of the world’s brokenness and of God’s inscrutability are not meant to bring us to despair but to destroy our false pretensions and humble us; to bring us to the point of recognising that we are finite - sinful creatures before an infinite-holy Creator; that we are people in need of His grace for our only good lies in Him. As Pascal put it:

“If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption; if there were no light, man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should partly be concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.” (Pensées 446)

Success· theologies and philosophies reflect an unrealistic, utopian search for perfection. As Francis Schaeffer often said: in a fallen world if you demand perfection or nothing - whether in marriage, career, church, any area of life - if you demand perfection or nothing, you get nothing! What you can have, by God’s grace, is reality; even amidst the struggles and difficulties of a fallen world there can be joy and a song.

For those who turn to God in surrender and trust, Ecclesiastes has a positive message. As we will see, however, this is not advice that can be reduced to a series of ‘how-to’s’ that can be mechanically employed to achieve success.

Firstly, at six key points in the structure of the book, it commends *the acceptance and enjoyment of life as a gift from God*: “I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil- this is the gift of God”. (Ecc 3:12,13). It is not saying “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!”, but rather “Thank God for what you do have; find contentment in it and enjoy it to the glory of God”. To stand humbly as creatures before our Creator and to live with heartfelt thanks for the basic created realities of food and work and companionship is a profound thing, and something that in the twentieth century West we so easily lose touch with.

Secondly, the book calls us to *enterprise*, to adventurous, joyful living despite the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death. This is the thrust of Chapter 11. “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well”. (Ecc 11: 1-6)

This is saying: Be bold in seizing life’s opportunities. Do not be paralysed by the seeming inevitability of trouble. Do not be paralysed by speculation or ignorance. Be bold in seeking to live your life productively under God’s hand. One day earthly experience will cease and your opportunity for serving God in this life will have gone. It is now that you have the opportunity to walk by faith and not by sight, to express your trust in and love for God, so use it! Life is unpredictable. Death is inevitable. And so the only safe course is to embrace life actively, use its opportunities enterprisingly as good stewards of God’s gifts, trusting our lives into His hands; walking by faith and not by sight.

Thirdly, the book, again and again, points us to our *accountability before God*. When we look at the facts of life ‘under the sun’, it all seems so unfair. But these facts are not all the facts. Each and every thought and word and action that occurs in human life is not ultimately meaningless. For each and every part of our lives is accountable to the One who created us, who sustains us - and who will judge us. “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man: For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil". (Ecc 12:13)4) That is the nearest thing you will get to a theology of success in Ecclesiastes. It is the 'success' of trusting God for the way to life and living in obedience whatever the hardships, difficulties and confusions we face in a fallen world. It is the God-given success of - recognising our failure and need of Him, and learning to walk humbly and faithfully before Him.

Such a reading of Ecclesiastes gives full weight to its tensions and is also consistent with the wider biblical pattern of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation. Indeed, it bears substantial support from Paul's exposition in Romans 8:18-25, a New Testament passage that makes a clear allusion to the 'vanity' of Ecclesiastes. Even in the light of the fullness of God's revelation in Christ, Romans 8 still gives full recognition to that fundamental tension between faith and sight that exists for the believer living in a fallen world that is subject to 'vanity'.

Significantly, both Ecclesiastes and Paul emphasise that this tension will only find its resolution at the consummation; a resolution that the New Testament teaches us is only made possible by the substitutionary, sin-bearing work of the God-man on the cross. 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, 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. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.'" (Rom 8:18-25)

False theologies and philosophies of success, whether ancient or contemporary, like all of fallen man's attempts to create his own autonomous reality, have set their hope in the wrong place. They are fundamentally unrealistic.

Over against such ideas Ecclesiastes shocks us into our right minds and calls us to the only true realism.