

# ***THE THINGS THAT DON'T WORK: ECCLESIASTES***

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## **THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

Ecclesiastes is one of the favorite books of the Bible for skeptics, scoffers, atheists and certain of the cultists. The reason for that is that there are certain passages in this book which seem to deny that there is life after death, that it is all over when this life ends. Atheists love to contend that the book of Ecclesiastes seems to confirm that view. That is why they frequently quote from it. Hedonists love this book too because it apparently endorses a rather Epicurean lifestyle. Those who pursue pleasure as the chief aim of life -- and there are a great many of them in this country today, as the United States is probably more hedonistic than any nation that has ever existed -- love the book because again and again throughout it we are exhorted to an "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we must die" philosophy. Then there are passages in this book which are the favorite texts of those who declare that even if we survive beyond this life we enter a period of quietness, a time when we have no knowledge or desires. This teaching falls in line with those cultists who teach "soul sleep," i.e., that when the body dies the soul goes to sleep within the body.

But all of these groups fail to note what we must note right from the beginning, that this book is an examination of secular wisdom and knowledge. The book clearly states at the outset that it is limiting itself to that which is apparent to the natural mind. One of the key phrases of the book is the continual repetition of the words, "under the sun." What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Verse 3 asks. We find that phrase used again in Verse 9. That is the limitation put upon this book.

Ecclesiastes is a collection of what man is able to discern under the sun, i.e., in the visible world. The book does not take into consideration revelation that comes from beyond man's powers of observation and reason. It is an inspired, an accurate book. It guarantees that what it reports is what people actually believe. but it is an examination of those beliefs. The book is not merely a collection of ancient philosophy, for what it talks about is very much up-to-date and extremely relevant. Here is what you will hear propounded in soap operas, in political speeches, in the radical or conservative movements of our day. Here is what you will hear in the halls of academia, or on the streets of any city. In this book the philosophies by which people attempt to live life are

brought into consideration and examined. That is why Ecclesiastes is so practical and up-to-date.

The first three verses introduce the theme of the book:

**The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.  
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity  
What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun? {Ecc 1:1-3 RSV}**

First, we learn that the writer is, "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." We immediately recognize that that could refer to no one but King Solomon. "The son of David" could refer to any descendant of David who sat on the throne after him, but this particularly relates to Solomon, as several things in the book will confirm.

Many of the critical commentators of our day question that view, and very few of them accept it. They try to date the book after the Babylonian exile, some 500 years after Solomon lived. That is the habitual stance of critics of the Old Testament. But their views have been proved wrong again and again, based, as they think they are, upon an examination of the culture of the day. I think, however, that we shall have no problem accepting the fact that it is indeed Solomon who shares with us in this book the wisdom that God taught him throughout his life.

The translators, unfortunately, here refer to Solomon as "the Preacher." I am sorry they used that term. I know the book sounds a little preachy at the beginning. On reading that second verse it would be so easy to affect a "stained-glass" voice. In a modern audience this, of course, would turn everybody off. The word for Preacher is the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which really means, "the one who gathers, assembles, or collects things." This is an apt title for the author of this book who has examined and then collected together the philosophies by which men live. But I think a more accurate English word to translate this would be "the Searcher." Here is a searching mind which has looked over all of life and seen what is behind the actions of people. That is the word which I am going to use wherever the word, "the Preacher," occurs. It is not really a preacher or proclaimer but a searcher that is in view.

This is indeed a search, and, if you are concerned about what he discovered, he tells us. You do not have to read the last chapter to find out the results of his search because he puts it right here in Verse 2: "Vanity of vanities" -- that is what he found. Vanity here does not mean pride of face. Some of you ladies -- maybe even some of you men -- spent too much time in front of the mirror this morning. Not only did you finish what you needed to do to make yourself presentable, but you admired it a little. We call that vanity, pride of face, but that is not what this Searcher is talking about. The word here, in the original, means, "emptiness, futility, meaninglessness, blah-ness." That is what he is talking about. His view of what he found out in his search through life is put in those terms. Emptiness, a feeling of futility -- that is what life brings.

Nothing in itself, the Searcher claims, will satisfy. No thing, no pleasure, no relationship, nothing he found had enduring value in life. That is why my sub-title for this study is, "The Things That Won't Work." Everybody is trying to make them work; everybody has seized on one or another of these philosophies, these views of life, and tries to make it satisfy him. But according to this Searcher, who has gone through it all, nothing will work. When he says, "Vanity of vanities, emptiness of emptiness," that is the Hebrew way of declaring the superlative. There is nothing more empty, this man concludes, than life.

In Verse 3 we have the question which he continually used in his search: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" What is the profit of it to him? This is an interesting Hebrew word, meaning, "that which is left over." After he has sucked dry all the immediate delight, joy or pleasure out of something, what is left over, what endures, what will remain to continually feed the hunger of his life for satisfaction? That is the right question. It is the question we all are asking. Is there anything that will really minister continually to my need -- that summum bonum, that highest good, which, if I find it, I do not need to look any further? Is there a key to continual pleasure, delight and joy in life?

The Searcher raises a very pertinent question right at the beginning. This is the search which this book will take upon. Verses 4-11, where he amplifies this a little, are a brief introduction to exactly what he means, Verses 4-7 describe the sense of futility which nature gives us as we live in this natural world; and Verses 8-11 describe the sense of futility that every person individually feels as he faces life.

Verses 4-7:

**A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains for ever.  
The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.  
The wind blows to the south,  
and goes round to the north;  
round and round goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they flow again. {Ecc1 1:4-7 RSV}**

-- the endless cycles of life. The Searcher's theme is stated in Verse 4: Humanity is transient, but nature is permanent. A generation goes and a generation comes -- the human race passes on from this life, comes into life, lives its term and goes on -- but the earth remains forever.

He has three proofs of this, the first of which is the circle of the sun. The sun rises in the east, runs across the heavens, apparently, and sets in the west; then it scurries around the dark side of the earth while we are sleeping, and there it is in the east again in the morning. That has been going on as long as time has been counted, as far back as we can read in human history. It is endless; it repeats itself again and again.

Then he speaks of the circuit of the winds, south to north. This is unusual, because we have no evidence that men understood scientifically the fact that the wind, the clouds and the great jet streams of earth run in circles. This is evident to us in our day because we can see from a satellite picture in any news broadcast the great circles of the winds. How they knew this back then I do not know. But Solomon knew it, though the scientific world of that day did not seem to understand it.

His third proof is the circuit of the evaporative cycle. Thirteen elders and pastors from this church have just returned from a backpack trip to the Sierras. There the mountain peaks were milking moisture from the clouds which passed over all you dry people down here. We had torrents of rain, hail, and even snow falling upon us while we were huddling in our little plastic tents, enjoying this backpack experience. Where does all the water which endlessly drops out of the sky come from? The answer, of course, is that it comes from the ocean. Out here to the west an invisible evaporative process is at work by which the water that runs into the sea never raises the level of the sea because there is an invisible raising of that water back up into the clouds. These clouds then move east by the circuit of the winds and drop their moisture again, and this goes on forever.

The writer is suggesting that there is something wrong in this. It is backwards, somehow. Man ought to be permanent and nature ought to be transient, he suggests. There is something within all of us that says this. We feel violated that we learn all these great lessons from life, but just as we have begun to learn how to handle life it is over, and the next generation has to start from scratch again.

The Scripture confirms that something is wrong. The Bible tells us that man was created to be the crown of creation. He is the one who is in dominion over all things. Man ought to last endlessly and nature ought to be changing, but it is the other way around. Man feels the protest of this in his spirit. We have all felt this. We all protest, inwardly, at least, the injustice of losing the wisdom of a Churchill, the beauty of a Princess Grace, or the charm of a John Kennedy. Something is wrong that all of this is suddenly taken away from us, while the meaningless cycle of nature goes on and on endlessly. Yes, the human spirit feels that strongly. That very pertinent question is going to be developed in the theme of this book.

But furthermore, the Searcher says, the present experience of every individual confirms this sense of futility. Verse 8:

**All things are full of weariness; [Actually, "full of weariness" is one Hebrew word which ought to be translated "restless."  
a man cannot utter it;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.  
What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done;  
and there is nothing new under the sun.  
Is there a thing of which it is said,  
"See, this is new"?  
It has been already,  
in the ages before us.  
There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to happen  
among those who come after. {Eccl 1:8-11 RSV}**

His thesis here is: "All things are restless." He has observed that there is an inherent restlessness in everything. In fact, it is so widespread nobody can possibly describe all the restlessness of life.

He has two proofs of this. First, human desire is never satisfied: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing." My wife's mother is 95 years old. She is just a shell of a person now, but her mind is still sharp and clear. The other day we had her in our home and somebody mentioned a far-off place. Immediately she said, "Oh, I wish I could see that." Despite her years, the eye is not tired of seeing; it longs yet to see other places, other realms, other customs. The eye is never satisfied.

Nor is the ear ever satisfied with hearing. We are always alert to some new idea or something new that has happened. That is why news programs are always popular. Television, radio and newspapers all cater to this hunger of the ear to hear something. Some juicy gossip about a Hollywood star will sell thousands of magazines and newspapers. That is why we tune in on soap operas. We just cannot tire of hearing something new. Some new way of making a profit, for instance, always makes its appeal. The Searcher's argument is that the ear never tires because human desire is never satisfied; it is a consequence of the restlessness that is built into life.

But second, he says, even though we long to see or hear something new, nothing new ever really shows up. Life is a rehash of what has been before; it is the old played over and over again. That is his argument. This too is a result of the restlessness that is built into life. Although something looks new to us, actually, "there is nothing new under the sun." Somebody immediately objects and says, "Wait a minute! They didn't have radio, television, space travel or any such thing until just a few decades ago. Why even you, Ray Stedman, ought to be able to remember way back to the days before they had any of those things!"

When Don Broesamle and I were in Hong Kong recently, spending a couple days of rest after a rather exhausting travel and speaking schedule, we stayed at the wonderful old British Peninsula Hotel on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong. Right across the street from us was a newly built planetarium, and Don and I went to see there *The Search For Other Civilizations*. It is always exciting to me to sit in those domed rooms. The lights go down, the stars begin to appear above like the brightest stars on a summer's night, and you suddenly feel the sense of eternity, you sense the greatness and the magnificence of the universe.

The show began by showing the great statues on Easter Island, in the Pacific Ocean, raising the question, "Where did these great statues come from?" These statues are huge, 20 feet or more in height, made of great stones that weigh hundreds of tons. Who erected them? Where did they come from, and how did they get there? Nobody has ever been able to answer those questions. Then the show took us into areas of South America where huge geometric patterns have been worked out over acres of ground. These designs have obviously been made by man, or some intelligent creature, yet they cannot even be seen unless they are viewed

from the sky. This raises the question, "Why would any people draw figures on the ground so huge that they cannot be seen unless they are viewed from the air?" Many have surmised that past civilizations did have ways of rising above the earth. Perhaps visitors from space used these patterns. Other mysteries, such as Stonehenge in England, are propounded and compounded as one explores the earth. It struck me that that planetarium show was a confirmation of what the Searcher of Ecclesiastes declares, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done." Other ages will repeat it. "There is nothing new under the sun."

Why then do things appear new? His answer is in Verse 11: Man's memory is faulty; we have forgotten things that once were. The planetarium show confirmed that. One excerpt showed the Mayans of Central America, the actual blood descendants of a race of intellectual giants who once lived in the area, who erected temples filled with mysteries that the present generation of Mayan Indians has long forgotten. They cannot explain them; they do not understand them. They have lost the knowledge of the past. This is what this writer declares. Our memories are so short that we lose what we know -- and, he suggests, it may happen again. All these technological marvels that we are so proud of may one day disappear in a great nuclear holocaust. Viewing our television sets or some such things, future generations may well ask, "What in the world is this jungle of wires for? What did they do with this thing?" That is the problem. "There is nothing new under the sun."

So the question is raised, "Is this all life is about?" Is it merely an empty pursuit of that which never satisfies? Can no breakthrough be made whereby something can be found that will continually meet the hunger of man's heart, to give an unending sense of delight, satisfaction and joy? That is the search.

Before the Searcher takes us into the details of this search -- which begins in Chapter 2 -- he gives us a word as to his qualifications, in Verses 12-18. These fall into two divisions, his position, and his diligence. Verses 12-14:

**I the Searcher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is emptiness and a striving after wind.**

**What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and what is lacking cannot be numbered. {Ecc 1:12-15 RSV}**

This man's position gave him unusual opportunity. He was a king, the highest authority in the land; no one would challenge what he did. And he was a king in a time of peace. For 40 years during the reign of Solomon no armies battered at the walls of Jerusalem, as they had been doing all through history and are threatening to do today. His father had amassed great wealth of which Solomon was the heir, and he himself had increased this wealth. For 40 years of the nation's life there was no demand for expenditure for munitions. It was a time of peace and great wealth. Furthermore, during this time the Gentile nations were sending delegates to Jerusalem. The Queen of Sheba came all the way from the ends of the earth, she said, to see and hear the wisdom of this man. Solomon had great opportunity.

Furthermore, he was able to investigate widely. "I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven," he says. He could get into everything. But, with all candor, he has to state, "It is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with." That translation misses something of what he meant. In the Hebrew it is not "the sons of men," rather, it is "the sons of man." The word is Adam, "the sons of Adam." So the reference is not to the conglomerate of humanity, it is to the nature of man.

I think he is making reference here to the fall of man. He is recognizing the fact that it is difficult for men to discover answers. There is something wrong inside of man. It is a tricky business for a man, who senses an overwhelming curiosity to discover the secrets of life around him, yet he finds himself baffled all the time by an inadequate understanding. Man cannot put it all together.

Furthermore, he was able to investigate even the opposites of things. "I have seen everything," he says. Yet there were certain limitations inherent in that. That is what he quotes in a proverb, "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered." It is difficult for man to discover the answers to life, because when he sees something wrong there is yet somehow an inbuilt difficulty that prevents him from correcting it. Have you ever felt, as I have, that when things go wrong in your family, although you long to put them right somehow you cannot get hold of it, you cannot make it right? "That which is crooked cannot be made straight." One of the great frustrations of life is that no matter how hard you try there are some things you cannot set straight. Also, no matter how much you may discover, there is information you would long to have that you cannot find. "That which is lacking cannot be numbered." That was this man's problem.

Then he speaks of his diligence, Verse 16:

**I said to myself, "I acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.**

**For in much wisdom is much vexation,  
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. {Ecc 1:16-18 RSV}**

For you students who have just gone back to school, that is a great verse to memorize. "He who increases knowledge increases sorrow." That is true, sad, but true. It is no argument for not increasing knowledge, though, because the alternative is even worse; ignorance is foolishness.

Isn't it remarkable that the Man who for all ages has been the personification of wisdom is also the one who is called "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"? {Isa 53:3}. Yet this Searcher kept on, despite the increasing frustration that the more he knew the more he knew he did not know. At the close of his life, Isaac Newton said, "I have been paddling in the shallows of a great ocean of knowledge." He too felt the frustration of not being able to encompass more.

This gives us a clue as to when this book was written. It must have been in the latter years of the reign of Solomon, after he had had ample opportunity to investigate all the areas of life and had done so. Following that period, which the book of First Kings describes, he fell into spiritual decline, led away by the idolatry of the wives he had married from foreign nations. This enlightened son of David, with all his knowledge of the law of Moses and all the insight of the word of God, actually ended up bowing down to lifeless idols in the heathen temples which he built for his wives in Jerusalem. But there was, apparently, a time of recovery.

One of the Targums of the Jews has an interesting word here:

When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became greatly elated with riches, and he transgressed the commandment of the Word of God; and he gathered many houses, and chariots, and riders, and he amassed much gold and silver, and he married wives from foreign nations. Whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, the king of the demons, and he drove him from the throne of his kingdom, and took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world, to reprove it; and he went about the provincial towns and cities in the land of Israel, weeping and lamenting, and saying, "I am Coheleth, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was King over Israel in Jerusalem."

There is no reference to this period in Scripture, so this may not be trustworthy. But it may be true. There is suggestion in Scripture that there came a time when King Solomon saw the folly of what he was doing, and repented. This book is his considered proclamation from a chastened mind of what he had learned from life. This is not an angry young man speaking. These are the words of a man who has been through it all and is sharing with us what he found in his search.

Did he find an answer? Did he find that key to life that makes everything yield up its treasure of joy? The answer to that is, Yes, he did, and he tells us the answer in this book. But his answer is not what he has started out with here. What he found "under the sun" was emptiness, but he went on to find something more

than that. That is what this book declares.

**Prayer:**

Thank you, Lord, for this wise, wise word. Thank you that the answers to life are not found in the wisdom of man. No human institution can give us the key to living. It must come from your loving hand, often through much pain and sorrow as we work our way to these great answers of life. Guide us now, guard us and help us to wait and learn and be attentive, remembering that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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## LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

by Ray C. Stedman

Whether we know it or not, all of us are engaged in a quest for something which will meet the needs of our heart. We all are looking for the secret to finding delight anytime, anywhere, and under any circumstances. What we are looking for, in other words, is the secret to contentment. That is the greatest blessing in life.

That too is what King Solomon was looking for, and in the book of Ecclesiastes he describes his search. In Chapter 1 of the book we were introduced to Solomon and learned of his qualifications for this search. He was very rich, he was an astute observer of human life, and he had plenty of time and money. He also was fully aware of the difficulties involved, stemming from the fallen nature of man and the intricacies and complexities of life. We learned from him that there is nothing in and of itself that can make us content. No thing, no possession, no relationship will endure to continually yield up to us the fruit of contentment and delight.

In Chapter 2 we are introduced to the record of what Solomon found in this search, the proof of that claim that I have just stated. Here we have an examination of the various ways by which men have sought through the ages to find contentment, enjoyment and delight in life. The first way, the one that is most popular today and always has been, is his examination of what philosophers call hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure. All of us instinctively feel that if we can just have fun we will find happiness. That is what the Searcher takes up first to see whether or not that is true.

He starts with what we can well call the experience of fun and games. Verses 1-3:

**I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine -- my mind still guiding me with wisdom -- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life. {Eccl 2:1-3 RSV}**

-- how best to spend your life. Have you ever asked yourself, What can I do that will make me happy all of my life? That was Solomon's question.

There is a lot implied in this paragraph. What a blast they must have had! Solomon, with all his riches, gave himself completely over to the pursuit of pleasure. He must have spent weeks and months, even years, in this search.

Here he gives us details of what he experienced. The first thing he says is that he said to himself, "Enjoy yourself," so he went in for mirth, laughter and pleasure. You can let your mind fill in the gaps here. Imagine how the palace must have rocked with laughter. Every night they had stand-up comics, and lavish feasts, with wine flowing like water. Harrah's Club was never like this! In fact, you may be interested to know what just one day's menu consisted of during this time. First Kings records what King Solomon required for one day to feed his retinue in the royal palace:

**Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour [a cor is about ten bushels], and sixty cors of meal [grain of various sorts], ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle [prime Grade A meat], a hundred sheep, besides harts, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl [chickens, ducks, and all kinds of birds]. (1 Kings 4:22-23)**

That was the menu for just one day. It has been estimated that that would feed between ten and twenty thousand people, so there were a lot of others involved in this search for pleasure along with the king.

Solomon gives us the result of the search. Laughter, he said to himself, is madness. I wonder if each of us has not experienced this to some degree. Have you ever spent an afternoon with a group of your friends giving yourself to laughing, having fun, and telling stories about all kinds of experiences? If you think carefully about it you will find that most of the stories were based on exaggeration; they were all embellished a little; they did not have much basis in reality. It is the same with laughter. Laughter only deals with the peripheries of life. There is no solid content to it. "The laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under the pot," (Ecclesiastes 7:6). Laughter is only a crackling noise, that is all. It leaves one with a sense of unfulfillment. I have had afternoons and evenings like that that were delightful occasions. We laughed all the time as we rehashed experiences, told jokes, etc., but when all was said and done we went to bed feeling rather empty and unfulfilled. That was Solomon's experience. He is not saying that this is wrong. The Bible does not say that either. It says that laughter is empty; it does not fulfill or satisfy.

Of pleasure, Solomon's comment is, "What use is it?" What does it contribute to life? Nothing, is his answer. Pleasure consumes resources, it does not build them up. Most of us cannot afford a night out more than once or twice a year because it costs so much. Going out uses up resources that hard work have put together. Pleasure, Solomon concludes, adds nothing.

Wine, he says, is of no help either. It appears to be. Every social gathering today almost invariably includes the dispensing of liquor first. The first thing the stewardess says after your plane is airborne is, "Would you like a cocktail?" There is a widespread conviction in the world that you cannot get strangers to talk to each other until you loosen them up with liquor. And it seems to work. After wine or cocktails are served, people soon begin to chat a little bit and the tenseness and quietness is lessened. But not much of any significance is ever said, either on planes or in social gatherings. There is little communication; it is all surface conversation. Wine, Solomon says, does not really help. "I looked into it," he says, "and I found that it too was vanity; it left people with a feeling of futility and emptiness."

So he moves to another form of pleasure. Verse 4:

**I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. {Eccl 2:4-6 RSV}**

Here is another form of pleasure -- projects, parks, and pools. Many people today attempt to find satisfaction in this way. There is pleasure in designing and building a house. Some people give their whole lives to this. This area is noted for the Winchester Mystery House, built by a woman who could not stop building. The house is a conglomeration of rooms, doors that open on to blank walls, staircases that go nowhere, etc., anything just to keep on building. Some wealthy people gain a reputation as philanthropists because they



endow beautiful public buildings, but they always manage to get their names engraved on a brass plaque somewhere in the building. All they are really doing is indulging an edifice complex! It was said of the emperor Nero that he found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble. But history tells us that he did not do that for the beautification of Rome, he did it for his own gratification and his own fame.

Solomon too gave himself to this. His own house took fourteen years to build, the temple seven. He built houses for his many wives whom he brought to Jerusalem, spending time, money and interest doing so. Southwest of Jerusalem, in a place seldom visited by tourists; there exist yet today vast depressions in the earth which are still called the Pools of Solomon, which he used to water the forest of trees which he planted in an effort to find satisfaction for his own heart.

Solomon next goes on to a summary of things which today we could only call "the good life." Verses 7-8:

**I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight. {Ecc 2:7-8 RSV}**

Does that sound modern? He had servants to wait on his every whim. The rich always want somebody to do all the hard work for them. In this case they were slaves who could not even go on strike if they did not like what was happening. Solomon had ranches to provide diversion and profit in the raising herds and flocks. Many wealthy people invest their money in cattle and horse ranches. Bank accounts too give a sense of security. Solomon says he gathered "silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces," and brought it all to Jerusalem. He had all the money he needed.

Then he had musicians brought in, men and women singers and bands. There probably were bands called, "The Wandering Pebbles," and "The Appreciative Corpses!" Certainly the top band of all, "The Bedbugs," played in the courts and palaces of the king! He had all kinds of bands, even the Jerusalem Pop Orchestra played for concerts under the stars. This is very up-to-date, isn't it? We think we have invented all of this, but here it is in the ancient book of Solomon.

Finally, they had Playmates, girls with bunny tails running around the palace. Concubines, Solomon calls them, "man's delight." All the joys of untrammelled sexuality were available at all times. This certainly shows how wrong is the idea of some people who say that the Playboy mentality is peculiar to the twentieth century alone. King Solomon tried all of this.

What did he find? Here are his honest conclusions, Verses 9-11:

**So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. 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 spent in doing it, and behold, all was emptiness and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. {Ecc 2:9-11 RSV}**

That is a very honest reporting. Solomon says there were some positive things, apparently. First, he gained a degree of notoriety, he says. He became great, surpassing all who went before him in Jerusalem. Many people think that fame will satisfy the emptiness of the heart. Solomon found fame. He adds that he kept his objectivity, though. "My wisdom remained with me," he says. In other words, "I was able to assess this as I went along. I did not lose myself in this wild search for pleasure. I was able to look at myself and evaluate it as I went along. But I tried everything. I did not miss or set aside anything." He belonged to the jet-set of that day. "I enjoyed it for a while," he says. "I found pleasure in all my toil, but that was all the reward I got for my labor -- momentary enjoyment. Each time I repeated it I got a little less enjoyment out of it." "My conclusion," Solomon says, "is that it was not worth it. Like a candle, it all burned away, leaving me jaded and surfeited. Nothing could excite me after that." He concludes that it was all emptiness, a striving after wind. He was burned out.

Verses 12-23 form a rather lengthy passage in which the Searcher compares two possible ways of pursuing pleasure. Somebody might well come along at this point and say to Solomon, "The reason you ended up so burned out is that you went at this the wrong way. You planned your pleasures, you deliberately gave yourself to careful scheduling of what you wanted to try next. But that is not the way to do this. The way to enjoy pleasure, to really live it up, is to abandon yourself. Go in for wild, impulsive, devil-may-care pleasure. Do what you feel like doing." Surely this was when the modern motto, "If it feels good, do it," was first advanced.

"All right," Solomon says, "I examined that." Verse 12:

**So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done. {Ecc1 2:12 RSV}**

By that he means that no one can challenge or contest his judgment in this area because no one could exceed his resources; people who follow him can only repeat what he himself has done.

But after trying it all, here are his conclusions. Verse 13:

**Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. {Ecc1 2:13 RSV}**

It is much better to go at it with your eyes open, he says. If you are going to pursue pleasure, at least do not throw yourself into it like a wild man. If you do so you will burn yourself out; you will get involved in things that you cannot imagine. It is like the difference between light and darkness. If there is any advantage to walking in light versus stumbling about in the darkness that is the difference between a wise and careful planning of pleasure and a foolish abandonment to it.

The reason why it is like that is this, Verse 14:

**The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; {Ecc1 2:14a RSV}**

In other words, the wise man can foresee some of the results of what he is doing and perhaps avoid some of them so that the full impact of living for pleasure does not hit him as fast and as completely as it does the fool. Many have discovered this to be true. The newspapers every day tell of young people who gave themselves to the wild pursuit of pleasure who are now in jail, or burned out with drugs after a relatively short time. Solomon says it is better to pursue pleasure according to the way of the wise.

But either way, he says, neither one can avoid death. Here is a very insightful statement at the close of Verse 14:

**... and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them. Then I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool! {Ecc1 2:14b-16 RSV}**

It does not really make a lot of difference; in the end they both come to the same fate.

I have often quoted for you the eloquent words of Lord Bertrand Russell. He was widely regarded as a very wise man, although a thorough-going atheist and a defender of humanism. This was his view of life:

One by one as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little days.

Those words express the very truth that the Searcher brings out here. Finally, Solomon says, no matter how carefully you pursue life and pleasure it will end in the darkness and dust of death; the fool and the wise man are both forgotten. How many of you knew wise men and women in your past whom no one remembers now? These words are terribly true.

Then he comes to his final, remarkable reaction. Verse 17:

**So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. {Eccl 2:17-21 RSV}**

Notice the increasing depression there. First, there is a sense of being grieved, of being hurt by life. "I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me," the Searcher says. His experience is one of increasing dislike because there is a diminishing return of pleasure for all the effort he makes to enjoy life. Have you ever seen people determined to have fun even if it kills them? They try their best to extract from the moment all the joy they can, but they get very little for their efforts. This, Solomon says, was a grief to him.

Then, second, he was frustrated. "Why do I have to work to put all this together, using all my wisdom and efforts, and eventually have to leave it to some fool coming behind me who will waste it in a few months?" he asks. He feels frustrated by the unfairness of this.

Finally, he sinks into despair. "I turned about and gave my heart up to despair," he says, because he is helpless to change this law of diminishing returns. I think this is the explanation for the phenomenon of the sudden, unexpected suicides of popular idols, of men and women who apparently had seized the keys to life, who had riches and fame, and whom the media constantly held up as objects worthy of imitation. Every now and then, however, finding nothing but frustration and despair as he has used up life too quickly and there is no joy left in it, one of these beautiful people takes a gun and blows his brains out. Think of people like Jack London, and Ernest Hemingway. Just last week Hemingway's brother committed suicide, as their father had done some years earlier. We think of Freddy Prinz; of Elvis Presley, who virtually killed himself with drugs. Yes, these words which Solomon has faithfully recorded for us are true; they correspond to life. Emptiness and vexation were Solomon's own experience when he tried to live it up without the missing element that it took to meet the hunger of his heart.

So he concludes with this eternal question, Verse 22:

**What has a man from all the toll and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? [Notice, "beneath the sun," in the visible world.] For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. [Insomnia at night, restlessness in his heart, is what he got under the sun.] This also is emptiness. {Eccl 2:22-23 RSV}**

Is there no answer? Is it all hopeless?

In the three verses which follow we have the first statement of the true message of this book. Is it just a matter of time before we too are all jaded, burned out and surfeited, life having lost all value, meaning and color for us? No, says the Searcher. Put a relationship with God into that picture and everything changes. The text says (Verse 24):

**There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. {Eccl 2:24a RSV}**

Unfortunately here is another instance where we have lost the true meaning of the verse by a bad translation. In

the next chapter there is a similar passage that properly includes the words, "there is nothing better than," but that is not what it says here. Delete from the text the words, "better than," because they are not in the Hebrew and they do not belong here. What this text actually says is,

There is nothing *in* man that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

There is nothing in man, there is no inherent value in him that makes it possible for him to extract true enjoyment from the things he does. That is the first thing Solomon says.

What does, then? He tells us:

**This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? {Eccl 2:24b-25 RSV}**

That is his second declaration, and that is the true message of this book. Enjoyment is a gift of God. There is nothing in possessions, in material goods, in money, there is nothing in man himself that can enable him to keep enjoying the things he does. But it is possible to have enjoyment all your life if you take it from the hand of God. It is given to those who please God. Verse 26:

**For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; {Eccl 2:26a RSV}**

Wisdom and knowledge have been mentioned before as things you can get from "under the sun," but they will not continue. To have added to it the ingredient of pleasure, of continual delight going on and on, unceasing throughout the whole of life, you must take it from the hand of God. The man who pleases God is given the gift of joy.

It is wonderful to realize that this book -- and the whole Bible -- teaches us that God wants us to have joy. He gave us life that we might have joy. In his letter to Timothy, Paul said, "He gives us richly all things to enjoy." It is God's desire and intent that all the good things of life that are mentioned here should contribute to the enjoyment of man; but only, says this Searcher, if you understand that that enjoyment does not come from things or from people. It is an added gift of God, and only those who please God can find it.

How do you please God? In many places in Scripture we are told, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." It is faith that pleases him, belief that he is there and that everything in life comes from his hand. Underscore in your minds the word all. Pain, sorrow, bereavement, disappointment, as well as gladness, happiness and joy, all these things are a gift of God. When we see life in those terms then any and every element of life can have its measure of joy -- even sorrow, pain, and grief. These things were given to us to enjoy. That is the message of this book. The writer will develop this further in the passages that follow.

This is also the message of Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." It is also the message of Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths."

The fourth thing which Solomon says here is that all others labor for the benefit of those who please God. Verse 26b:

**... but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. {Eccl 2:26b RSV}**

That explains a remarkable thing that I have observed many times. Privileged as I often am to speak in various conference centers around the country, I have often noted the fact that many of these Christian gatherings are held in the expensive homes of millionaires who were not Christians:

I am thinking, for instance, of Glen Eyrie, the headquarters of the Navigators, outside Colorado Springs.

There in a beautiful natural glade, General William Palmer, founder of Colorado Springs and founder of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, built an English-style stone castle for his British bride. She never lived in it more than a few weeks, and he himself never enjoyed that property at all. It sat empty for years. Finally it was sold several times and ended up in the hands of the Navigators, who are using it as a Christian conference ground and world headquarters for their training movement.

Twice I have been invited to be conference speaker at a beautiful site on a bluff overlooking the Columbia River in Oregon, an estate called Menucha. This wonderful home, covering almost an acre of ground, was built by a wealthy Jewish businessman who had little interest in spiritual things. He entertained Presidents at that home, but now it is in the hands of the Alliance Churches of Oregon.

You can duplicate this kind of story many, many times. Isn't it remarkable that God so planned life that these multimillionaires in their pursuit of pleasure spent lavishly on their homes in order that their estates might at last be given into the hands of those who please God? These lavish spenders will not get anything for all their efforts. There is a deep irony about this.

**This also is vanity and a striving after wind. {Eccl 2:26c RSV}**

Isn't it strange that the more you run after life, panting after every pleasure, the less you find, but the more you take life as a gift from God's hand, responding in thankful gratitude for the delight of the moment, the more that seems to come to you? Even the trials, the heartaches and handicaps that others seek to avoid are touched with the blessing of heaven and seem to minister to the heart of the one who has learned to take them from the hand of God.

Fanny Crosby is one of the favorite hymn writers of all time. Blind almost from birth, she lived to be 95 years old. When she was only eight years old she wrote this couplet:

Oh, what a happy child I am  
Although I cannot see.  
I am resolved that in this world  
Contented I will be.  
How many blessings I enjoy  
That other people don't.  
To weep and sigh  
Because I'm blind,  
I cannot and I won't.

That is the philosophy that pleases God, and that is what the Searcher is talking about here.

All the objections that can be raised against this are going to be examined and tested in the pages that follow. When we finish the book we will find that the Searcher has established without a doubt that joy is a gift of God, and it comes to those who take life daily, whatever it may bring, from the hand of a loving Father.

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## **THAT WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

I am amazed at the variety of things that are offered to us every day to help us find the secret of successful living. Magazine articles by the dozens tell us how to cope with various problems; TV commercials -- dozens to a program it seems -- bombard us, telling us how to be successful in life, or at least how to look successful even if we really are not, health clubs offer us saunas and whirlpool baths to relax us so we can face life with equanimity; while various kinds of drugs are available to turn us on, turn us off, take us out, or whatever.

All this is evidence of the universal search for the secret of enjoyment of life. Billions of dollars are spent every day on this quest. That is the very quest that the book of Ecclesiastes tells us about. The greatest experiment ever performed in the history of mankind to test the various approaches to success, enjoyment or contentment in life is recorded in this 3,000 year old book.

We now have come to the third chapter, which describes the combination of opposites in our experience. We read, for instance, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Verse 4). Throughout this chapter the idea is propounded that there is an appropriate time for all of life's experiences. Have you ever laughed at the wrong time? I have. I was at a funeral once, and the leader asked all present to stand upon their feet. One of my friends whispered to me, "What else could you stand on?" I broke up -- and it was very obviously the wrong time to do so. Ron Ritchie won a kind of immortality for himself at Dallas Theological Seminary when, on the day of graduation, that most solemn occasion in educational life, he walked down the aisle, dressed in his sombre graduation robe, holding a coffee cup in his hand. He is remembered in the annals of Dallas Seminary as a man who did not know the appropriate action for a certain time.

There is an appropriate time for everything, the unpleasant as well as pleasant experiences. That is the argument of Ecclesiastes 3. This is not merely a description of what happens in life, it is a description of what God sends. Many of us are familiar with Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws, the first of which is, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." When talking to someone about his relationship with God, that is an appropriate place to begin. That is the plan that is set forth here. All along, the Searcher, the author of this book, is saying that God desires to bring joy into human experience. Many people think Ecclesiastes is a book of gloom and pessimism because, on the level of the writer's limitations -- which, he says, are, "under the sun," i.e., the visible things of life -- his findings are gloomy and pessimistic. But that is not the message of the book. God intends us to have joy and his program to bring it about includes all these opposites.

If you look carefully you will see that these eight opening verses gather around three major divisions which correspond, amazingly enough, to the divisions of our humanity: body, soul, and spirit. The first four pairs deal with the body:

**For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up; {Eccl 3:1-3 RSV}**

Notice how truly those apply to the physical life. None of us asked to be born; it was something done to us, apart from us. None of us ask to die; it is something done to us by God. So this is the way we should view this list of opposites, as a list of what God thinks we ought to have. It begins by pairing birth and death as the boundaries of life, "under the sun."

The next pair deals with the supply of food: "A time to plant and a time to harvest." Everything must come in its appropriate time. If you get it out of synch you are in trouble. Try to plant a crop in the middle of winter when snow is on the ground and it will not grow. Half of the problem of life is that we are constantly trying to run this schedule ourselves. But God has already planned the schedule. There is an appropriate time for everything.

There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." That may sound strange to us, but the process of dying goes right along with the process of living. Doctors tell us that every seven years all the cells in our bodies die. But our bodies do not die. What you are now is not what you were seven years ago, yet you are the same. Man's physical body is one of the miracles of human history. As the psalmist says, "We are fearfully and

wonderfully made." How can we understand the fact that each cell seems to pass on to the cell which replaces it the memory of the past so that, even though our brain cells have changed, the memory goes back beyond the life of the cell itself? There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." God brings it to pass.

There is "a time to break down, and a time to build up." Youth is the time for building up. Muscles grow, abilities increase, coordination gets better. Then, if you hang on long enough as I have and you reach that 65th milestone, there is a time when everything starts to fall apart -- "a time to break down." Type gets smaller and smaller, steps get higher and higher, trains go faster and faster, people speak in lower and lower tones -- "a time to break down." But that is appropriate. We should not fight it. It is not evil, it is right. God has determined this, and no matter what we may think about it, it is going to continue that way. That is what this is telling us.

Then the Searcher moves into the realm of the soul, with its functions of thinking, feeling and choosing, the social areas, and all the interrelationships of life that flow from that. Verse 4:

**a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance. {Eccl 3:4 RSV}**

All these things follow closely, and they are all appropriate. No one is going to escape the hurts and sorrows of life, is what he is saying here. God chose them for us. The proof of that is when God's own Son came. He was not handed a beautiful life with everything pleasant and delightful, free from struggle and pain. No, he was, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," {Isa 53:3b}. In a fallen world it is right that there will be times of hurt, of sorrow and weeping.

But there will be times too when it is right to laugh, to be happy and carefree. There is a time of grief and tears, "a time to mourn," but there is a time to celebrate and to enjoy a festive occasion. Jesus attended the celebration of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. He entered into it and even provided part of the feast.

Then there is "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together," {Eccl 3:5a RSV}. There is a time to break things down, and a time to build them up again. This particularly has to do with our social structures, our relationships with others. There is a time when we need to embrace others, to show our support for them. But there is a time when we ought to refuse to embrace them, when our support would be misunderstood and would be tantamount to complicity with something evil. Those times come from the hand of God.

The last six of these opposites relate to the spirit, to the inner decisions, the deep commitments. There is "a time to seek [work, marriage, new friends], and a time to lose," {Eccl 3:6a RSV}. There comes a time in life when we should curtail certain friendships, or change our jobs, for instance, and lose what we had in the past. It is proper and appropriate that these times should come.

There is "a time to keep and a time to cast away," {Eccl 3:6b RSV}. There are values and standards which must never be surrendered, while there are other times when we need to throw away things -- clean out the attic, the garage, throw away the old clothes, etc. This is true of habits and attitudes at times. Resentments need to be thrown away. Grudges and long-standing hurts need to be forgiven and forgotten.

There is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak," {Eccl 3:7b RSV}. There are times when we know something, a piece of gossip, and we should not say it; we ought not to speak. There are times when we ought to speak, when something we are keeping secret would deliver someone or bring truth into a situation; a time to speak up.

There is "a time to love, and a time to hate," {Eccl 3:8a RSV}. When is it time to hate? Think of young Abraham Lincoln the first time he saw human beings sold on the slave blocks in New Orleans. He felt hatred rising in his heart. He resolved that if he ever got a chance to smash slavery he would do so. Lincoln's hatred of slavery was perfectly appropriate. There is "a time to love," when it is right that we should extend our love to somebody who is hurting, someone who is feeling dejected or rejected, lonely or weak.

There is "a time for war, and a time for peace," {Eccl 3:8b RSV}. We ought to remember this as we consider some of the issues before us today. When tyranny rides roughshod over the rights of men there is a time when a nation properly makes war. But there is a time when war is absolutely the wrong thing, when no provocation should be allowed to start one because war can explode into violence far beyond anything demanded by a particular situation. How much is permitted in that regard is a perfectly moot subject, one that is being widely debated today.

I point out that all of this is God's wonderful plan for your life. The problem, of course, is that it is not our plan for our life. If we were given that right we would have no unpleasantness at all in life. But that would ruin us. God knows that people who are protected from everything almost invariably end up being impossible to live with; they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, unprincipled. God sends these things in order that we might be taught. There is a time for everything, the Searcher says.

But more than that, if God has a time for everything he also has a purpose in everything, as this next passage declares. Verse 9:

**What gain has the worker from his toil? {Eccl 3:9 RSV}**

What is "left over" to provide a permanent sense of satisfaction after the momentary pleasure is extracted from some pleasurable experience? That is the question with which the Searcher examines everything. He has already asked it three times in this book. The answer follows:

**I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. {Eccl 3:10 RSV}**

Life itself is going to hide the secret. The purpose of these things is found by careful, thoughtful examination, as he has been making all along.

Now he gives us that answer. He found three things. First,

**He has made everything beautiful in its time; {Eccl 3:11a RSV}**

We have already looked at that. Everything is appropriate and helpful to us, what appears to be the negative as well as the positive. These are not curses and obstacles; they are God's blessings, deliberately provided by him.

Even our enemies are a blessing. I received a letter from a businessman friend of mine in Dallas, a very thoughtful man, giving me his thinking along this line. He said that there were five types of people whom he had learned from in life, "heroes, models, mentors, peers and friends." He continues:

I have added another: Enemies. They have a very important place in our lives. Jumping into the deep water first, I suggest they can provide meaning, much as the poor do for Mother Theresa. Enemies are the opposite bank of our existence. We define our position partly by theirs, as light is the opposite of darkness, of course. They plumb the depth of our Christian maturity, exposing our self-centeredness, self-righteousness and arrogance. They attack and expose our motive, for seldom do we form an enemy out of a mere mistake of fact or even opinion. Enemies are personal, not positional. Therefore, as a personal matter we are commanded to love them. This command is like a spiritual thermometer stuck into the depths of our feverish little souls. It is so interesting that the Jewish historian and sociologist Hart puts this command as the greatest difference between Christianity and all other world religions.

"Love your enemies," Jesus said {Matt 5:44, Luke 6:27}, because they are valuable to you. They do something for you that you desperately need. Our problem is that we have such a shallow concept of things. We want everything to be smooth and pleasant. More than that, we want to be in charge, we want to limit the term of hurt or pain. But God will not allow us to take his place and be in charge.

There is a rhythm to life which even secular writers recognize. The book, *Passages*, speaks of the various experiences we pass through as we grow through life.



The second thing the Searcher learned in his search is,

**... also he has put eternity into man's mind, [or literally, "man's heart"] {Eccl 3:11b RSV}**

There is a quality about life, about humanity, that can never be explained by the rationale of evolution. No animal is restless and dissatisfied when its physical needs have been met. Observe a well fed dog sleeping before the fire on a cold day. He is with his family, enjoying himself, not worried about anything. Put a man in that position and pretty soon he will feel a sense of restlessness. There is something beyond, something more he is crying out for.

This endless search for an answer beyond what we can feel or sense in our physical and emotional needs is what is called here "eternity in man's heart." St. Augustine said, "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they learn to rest in Thee." Man is the only worshipping animal. What makes him different cannot be explained by evolutionary procedure. He is different because he longs for the face of God. C.S. Lewis said, "Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but he takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home." There is a longing for home, there is a call deep in the human spirit for more than life can provide. This itch which we cannot scratch is part of God's plan.

The third thing which the Searcher learned is that mystery yet remains:

**... yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. {Eccl 3:11c RSV}**

We are growing in our knowledge, but we discover that the more we know the more we know we do not know. The increase of knowledge only increases the depth of wonder and of delight. In the sovereign wisdom of God we cannot solve all mysteries. As the Apostle Paul put it, "we see through a glass darkly," {1 Cor 13:12 KJV}; we are looking forward to the day when we shall see face-to-face.

We cannot know all the answers to all the conundrums and enigmas of life. That is why the exhortation of Scripture is always that we must trust the revelation of a Father's wisdom in areas we cannot understand. Jesus said over and over that the life of faith is like that of a child. A little child in his father's arms is unaware of many things that his father has learned. But, resting in the father's arms, he is quite content to let those enigmas unfold as he grows, trusting in the wisdom of his father. That is the life of faith, and that is what we are to do in our experience.

In Verses 12-15 we learn the purpose of God in this remarkable plan. Three things are found here. First,

**I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; {Eccl 3:12 RSV}**

Yes, everybody agrees with that. That is what the commercials tell us: "Live life with gusto. You only go around once. Seize it now." All right. The Searcher says so too.

Secondly, he says,

**also that it is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. {Eccl 3:13 RSV}**

Underline the words, "take pleasure." That is what the Searcher finds that man cannot produce. Things in themselves give a momentary, not lasting, pleasure. True enjoyment is the gift of God, it is what God wants. That is what the Searcher has been arguing all along.

What a different picture this is of life under the sovereign Lordship of a Living God from what most people think God is like! I saw a book on sex the other day entitled, "Designed for Pleasure." That is true. But it is

not merely sex that is designed for pleasure, all things are designed for human pleasure . If you think the thing in question is going to produce lasting pleasure, however, you will miss it. The secret is that it is the knowledge of God in that relationship that produces enjoyment. God wants it so. We are not in the grasp of the Great Cosmic Joykiller, as many people seem to view God. God delights in human enjoyment.

The third thing the Searcher says is that it all must be discovered by realizing that God is in charge and he will not bend his plan for anyone. Verse 14:

**I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, {Eccl 3:14a RSV}**

God has sovereignly, independently, set up the plan of life in a way that we cannot interfere with. He has done so, in order that men should fear before him.

All through the Bible we read that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," {Psa 111:10, Prov 9:10}. Until a man recognizes and trusts the superior wisdom of God he has not begun to fear God. This fear is not abject terror of God, it is respect and honor for him. If you attempt to live your life without the recognition of God, ultimately you will find yourself, as the Searcher found himself, empty, dissatisfied and restless, feeling that life is miserable and meaningless. The secret of life is the presence of God himself.

Most of the struggle of life comes from us wanting to play God ourselves, wanting to be in charge of what happens to us. That is true even of Christians. When God refuses to go along we sulk and pout and get angry with him. We throw away our faith and say, "What's the use? I tried it but it doesn't work." What a foolish statement! God will not surrender his prerogatives. "Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it -- God has made it so in order that men should fear before him."

This is taught us through many repetitions. Verse 15:

**That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. {Eccl 3:15 RSV}**

A better translation of that last phrase is, "God brings back what has already passed away."

The Searcher is here referring to the repetition of the lessons of life. We do not seem to learn these very well. I have learned some lessons in life and said, "Lord, I see what you are after. I've got it now. You don't have to bring this one back again." Down the road, however, I make the same mistake again. Some circumstance painfully recalls to mind what I had once seen as a principle in life. I have to come with hat in hand and say, "Lord, I'm a slow learner. Have patience with me." God says, "I understand. I'm prepared to have patience with you and teach you this over and over and over again until you get it right." Have you found life to be like that? The Searcher tells us that he too had to learn this.

That is the Searcher's thesis. God desires us to learn the secret of enjoyment. That enjoyment will not come from a variety of experiences. Those will bring but momentary pleasure, but not the secret of contentment, of continual enjoyment.

A plaque on my bedroom wall which I read every morning says,

No thought is worth thinking  
that is not the thought of God.  
No sight is worth seeing  
unless it is seen through his eyes.  
No breath is worth breathing  
without thanks to the One  
whose very breath it is.

Verse 16 of Chapter 3 begins a section which runs through Chapter 5, in which a series of objections to this thesis are examined by the Searcher. I am not going to cover all of it this morning, but will take just one

objection which occurs here in Chapter 3.

Someone says, "Wait a minute. You say that God has a wonderful plan for my life, that he is a God of justice, but last week I was seeking justice in a courtroom and I found that the cards were stacked against me; all I got was the rawest injustice. How do you square that with this 'wonderful plan for my life?'" The Searcher takes this up, Verse 16:

**Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. {Eccl 3:16 RSV}**

Human courts are designed to correct injustice, but they are often filled with wickedness and injustice. Just last week I was a witness in a case in which a man's business was being destroyed by legal maneuverers. Everyone knew this was unjust, but because of certain legalities no one could get hold of the matter to correct it. That kind of injustice creates anger and frustration in many hearts. People say, "What do you mean, I am to accept that as from the hand of God?"

The Searcher picks that up and says there are three things he wants to show us about it. First,

**I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. {Eccl 3:17 RSV}**

Though there is injustice, that is not the end of the story. God may correct it even within time, and if he does not do so "in time," still he has appointed a time when it all will be brought out. The Scriptures speak of a time appointed by God when all the hidden motives of the heart will be examined, when "that which is spoken in secret shall be shouted from the housetops" {cf, Matt 10:27, Luke 12:3}, and justice will ultimately prevail. That is what this Searcher says. Injustice is limited in its scope.

Second,

**I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts. {Eccl 3:18 RSV}**

In other words, there is a beastly quality about all of us which injustice will bring out. What is it about a man that makes him prey upon even his friends or neighbors?

On the TV program, *The People's Court*, the other night, one case concerned a young woman who had gotten angry at her friend and roommate, whom she had known for years. and in her anger had poured sugar into the woman's car's gas tank, absolutely destroying the engine. The judge was appalled at the vindictive spirit of this attractive looking young woman who had acted in such a vicious way. There is a beastliness about us all. Put in a situation where we are suffering injury we react with viciousness. God allows certain circumstances to show us that we all have that quality about us.

We are like animals in other ways, too, the Searcher says. Verse 19:

**For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; [not Hell; he is talking about the grave] all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. {Eccl 3:19-20 RSV}**

Man is frail, his existence temporary. Like the animals, we do not have very long to live on this earth. Injustice sharpens the realization that we do not have long to live rightly, honestly and truly before God. We die like an animal and our bodies dissolve like a beast's. From the human standpoint one cannot detect any difference. That is what the Searcher says in Verse 21:

**Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? {Eccl 3:21 RSV}**

That really should not be a question, as it is stated here in this text. It should read this way: "Who knows that the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth."

That is something which only revelation tells us. Experience does not offer any help at all here. From a human standpoint, a dead man and a dead dog look as if the same thing happened to both of them. But from the divine point of view that is not the case. Though we die like beasts, the spirit of man goes upward while the spirit of the beast goes downward. Later on the Searcher states very positively that at death the spirit of man returns to God who gave it, but the spirit of the beast ends in nothingness. Injustice stems from our beastliness, and God's plan for life will uncover it.

Finally, he concludes in Verse 22:

**So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; [But remember, enjoyment comes only from God. Then he adds the question] who can bring him to see what will be after him? {Eccl 3:22 RSV}**

He does not answer that question here; he leaves it hanging. The answer, of course, is that only God can help us to understand what lies beyond life.

The wonderful thing to extract from this passage is the great truth that God wants us to learn how to handle life in such a way that we can rejoice in any and every circumstance, as the Scriptures exhorts us. Recognize that all comes from a wise Father. Though circumstances bring us pain as well as pleasure, it is his choice for us. Rejoice that in the midst of the pain there is the possibility of pleasure.

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By: Ray C. Stedman  
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## WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THIS?

by Ray C. Stedman

In Ecclesiastes 4 and 5, the ancient Searcher of Israel answers a question all of us have asked at one time or another. Whenever a tragic circumstance occurs, or a terrible injustice is revealed, somebody is sure to remark, "You say your God is a God of love, but how could a God of love allow such a thing to happen?" You may even have heard this question asked this past week: "How could a God of love let seven innocent people take what they thought was a headache remedy only to ingest cyanide and die instead?" "How could a God of love allow the murder of unarmed men, women and children in the refugee camps of Lebanon?" Sometimes the question is more personal: "How can you say God loves me when he lets me work my fingers to the bone and allows other people who have inherited wealth spend their days enjoying themselves?"

In Chapter 3 the Searcher declared that God has a wonderful plan for each life. There is a time for everything: "a time to be born, a time to die; a time to weep, a time to laugh." Through that list of opposites he declared that God has a perfect plan that includes what we need, the painful as well as the pleasant. If we accept those as God's choices for us, coming from his loving heart -- not out of anger, not out of desire to punish, but out of love -- we will discover three wonderful things. First, we will be enabled to enjoy all of life, even the painful circumstances. Secondly, we will learn to know God. Jesus said, "This is life eternal, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." We will satisfy the sense of eternity which God has put in each heart. That will happen when our attitude toward life changes because of our relationship with God. Thirdly, this lesson will be repeated for us until we learn it, until we get it down right.

There followed immediately four frequently voiced objections that appear to contradict this idea that God has a wonderful plan for each life. We looked at the first last week: the presence of injustice in the place where justice ought to be found, the courts and judicial systems of our land. This past week the newspapers had an account of a man who had spent five years in jail for another man's crime. When this was discovered he was freed from prison but was given absolutely nothing in recompense for his time in jail. That kind of injustice raises the question, "What do you mean, 'God has a perfect plan for our lives?' How can you square that statement with such an unjust circumstance?" The Searcher gave us two answers. One, we must remember that the final recompense lies yet ahead; God has appointed a time when he will bring to light all the hidden things and straighten them out; and second, even injustice teaches us something of great value: it reveals to us our own beastliness -- we share with the animals a beastly quality which injustice will bring out, and, like the animals, we have a temporary existence.

In Chapter 4 the Searcher now discusses the remaining three objections to the idea that God has a wonderful plan for our life. First, he addresses the objection we have already referred to -- oppression in society. Verses 1-3:

**Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive; but better than both is he who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. {Ecc 4:1-3 RSV}**

What accounts each of us could list of similar circumstances! Oppression almost invariably preys on the helpless, the weak and the infirm, the people who cannot defend themselves. The Searcher knows this. Notice how he records the anguish, the misery that it causes. He speaks of "the tears of the oppressed," the weeping, the sorrow and the brokenness which the oppressed feel over something they can do nothing about. Then he twice categorizes the awful sense of helplessness that is evoked by oppression. There is "no one to comfort" the oppressed of a world filled with this kind of thing. The hopeless and the helpless ask, "Who can we turn to? Where can we go for deliverance?" They feel that death would be preferable to what they are going through; they even come to the point where they wish they had never been born. Job felt that way. "Let the day perish wherein I was born" {Job 3:3}, he said. "Why did I not die at birth?" (Job 3)

How do you square that with the glib declaration, "God has a wonderful plan for your life"? How can you say that to someone who is being oppressed? The Searcher does not attempt to answer that for the moment.

First, he looks at another objection (Verses 4-11), the idea that rather than enjoyment being man's great motivating passion, envy and ambition really are the driving force behind his activity. Verse 4:

**Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. {Ecc 4:4 RSV}**

How accurately this records what is happening in human history! People really do not want things, they want to be admired for the things they have. What they want is not the new car itself, but to hear their neighbors say, "How lucky you are to have such a beautiful car!" That is what people want -- to be the center, the focus of attention.

I clipped from Newsweek magazine last week an article by a reporter on life in Washington, D.C. Here is what she says drives people in the nation's capital:

Ambition is the raving and insatiable beast that most often demands to be fed in this town. The setting is less likely to be some posh restaurant or glitzy nightclub than a wholly unremarkable glass office building, or an inner sanctum somewhere in the federal complex. The reward in the transaction is frequently not currency at all, but power, perquisites, and ego massage. For this, the whole agglomeration of psychological payoffs, there are people who will sell out almost anything, including their self-respect, if any, and the well being of thousands of others.

That is saying exactly what this ancient Searcher is saying. The drive to be admired is the true objective of life. But, he says, this too "is vanity and a striving after wind."

Sometimes, however, when people become aware of this they flip over to the opposite extreme: they drop out of society, they get out of the rat race, they go on relief and let the government support them. We saw a lot of that kind of reaction here in California ten years ago. Young people, particularly, were then saying, "We don't want to be a part of the rat race any more; we don't want to strive to be admired. We'll drop out of society." But that is not the answer either, the Searcher says. Verse 5:

**The fool folds his hands, and eats his own flesh. {Eccl 4:5 RSV}**

Many young people who were part of the youth revolution, the counter culture society of a few years ago, have found this to be true: that when you sit in idleness you devour yourself, your resources disappear, your self respect vanishes. They had to learn the painful lesson that the only way to maintain themselves, even physically, let alone psychologically, was to go to work and stop devouring themselves.

It would be much better, says the Searcher, to lower your expectations and choose a less ambitious lifestyle. Verse 6:

**Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.  
{Eccl 4:6 RSV}**

Yet, he says, so powerful is ambition and the desire to be envied that men actually keep working and toiling even when they have no one to leave their riches to. Verse 7:

**Again, I saw vanity under the sun: a person who has no one, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. {Eccl 4:7-8 RSV}**

How true! Some people keep on toiling although they have no one to work for, and nothing to do with the money they make. They even deny themselves the pleasures of life in order to keep laying up funds. What a sharp example is given to us in the recently concluded story of billionaire Howard Hughes. He did not know what to do with his money. His heirs, whom nobody can even identify for certain, are left to squabble over it. Somehow in all his tragic existence, the man never seemed to ask himself, "Why am I doing this? What is life all about? Why am I amassing tremendous amounts of money when I don't even spend a dime on myself?" Such is the folly of toiling for riches.

In contrast, the Searcher admits that companionship is better than loneliness. Verse 9:

**Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. {Eccl 4:9-12 RSV}**

Someone may well say, "It's true that men work out of a sense of ambition and a drive for admiration from others, but it is better to have companionship while doing so."

The Searcher agrees, and lists four advantages to this:

First, it will increase the reward. Two really can live cheaper than one. Many people get married on that basis. During the Depression, there was a popular song that said, "Potatoes are cheaper, tomatoes are cheaper, now's the time to fall in love." Many young people agreed with that and got married. But economics have changed. Today potatoes are dearer, tomatoes are dearer, but still, now is the time to fall in love because you can combine your resources. Even the IRS recognizes the advantage of this by giving some tax breaks in that

regard.

Secondly, he says, a friend will provide help in time of trouble. If you get into difficulty your friend or roommate will be there to help you.

You have to have grown up in Montana to fully appreciate the third advantage! When the temperature is 40-below-zero outside, you understand what the Searcher means when he says, "If two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone?"

Fourthly, the presence of another or more than one other in your life makes defeat unlikely: "A man might prevail against one but two will withstand him, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." While there are advantages in companionship, nevertheless the Searcher's argument is that still it adds up to emptiness; it does not satisfy the sense of eternity that God has put in men's hearts. Many a couple sit in loneliness, staring at a television screen for hours at a time, or seek some other diversion to fill the emptiness and misery of their lives. No, companionship, though better than loneliness, is not the answer either.

A final objection is raised in the latter part of Chapter 4. This says, in effect, that living a long life does not always guarantee that one will learn the secrets of enjoyment. This is what the Searcher has been saying, that God has a perfect plan and he will teach you as you go; if you live long enough and listen carefully you will learn that enjoyment is a gift of God. But now comes the argument that people who live a long time still do not seem to learn this. Verse 13:

**Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who will no longer take advice, even though he had gone from prison to the throne or in his own kingdom had been born poor. {Eccl 4:13-14 RSV}**

A wise youth is better than an old foolish king who had great opportunities handed to him. Yet age can make one headstrong and fanatical, convinced that everything he wants to do is right. Even living a long time does not teach us all the lessons, although a long life usually does teach a lot of lessons. But all of us know people who ought to know better, people who have forgotten, as this points out, the lessons they learned in their youth. Here was a king who had gone from prison to the throne because he understood life, he had been poor and he was exalted to a position of power, but he had forgotten all the lessons he had learned.

The Searcher's second argument is that even the wise youth will go on to repeat the same error, Verse 15:

**I saw all the living who move about under the sun, as well as that youth, who was to stand in his place; there was no end of all the people; he was over all of them. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. {Eccl 4:15-16 RSV}**

Here is a young man who went through the same difficulties, who had won his way to popularity and power, yet he did not learn those lessons either. Although he had the example of his predecessor, he ultimately lost the respect of others. So even old age, even time, does not always teach us these lessons. It all remains yet, "vanity, emptiness, a striving after wind."

In Chapter 5, a marvelous chapter, the Searcher answers these objections in a wonderful way. There are four things which he declares.

First:

**Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; {Eccl 5:1a RSV}**

Learn to let God be God; that is the first thing he declares to us. The lessons of life will fall into place when you learn that. God is in charge of life, let him be in charge; take these lessons from his hands.

The place to learn that is in the house of God. When you go there, guard your steps, i.e., enter thoughtfully,

expect to be taught something. In ancient Israel, of course, the house of God was the Temple in Jerusalem. There sacrifices were offered, and explanation was made to the people as to what they meant. There the law was read, and the wisdom of God about life was given to people; this marvelous Old Testament was unfolded, with its tremendous insights into the truth about life, about what humanity basically and fundamentally is. The Temple was the only place in the land where people could learn these things. In our day the house of God is no longer a building. We must be clear about that. You, the people, are the house of God. What the Searcher is saying is that when you gather together as the people of God, be expectant; there is something to be learned.

Secondly, he says, listen carefully:

**... to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil. {Ecc 5:1b RSV}**

A fool is somebody who glibly utters naive, ingenuous and usually false things. What the Searcher clearly has in mind here is our tendency to complain and murmur about what has been handed us in life. When we gripe and grouse about our circumstances we are really complaining against God. We are complaining about the choice God has made in his wonderful plan for our life. We will never learn to enjoy anything that way, not even our pleasures, let alone our pain. So he says, listen carefully, for among the people of God the truth of God is being declared; the wisdom of God is being set forth. Just this morning a man said to me, "I have been going through a painful experience this past week. I learned to see myself and it horrified me. I saw things in myself which I despise in others." That is encouraging. There is a man who is learning truth about himself.

The Searcher continues, Verse 2:

**Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. {Ecc 5:2-3 RSV}**

Almost everybody takes the phrase, "God is in heaven." to mean that God is off somewhere, high above the universe, watching the affairs of men, while we insignificant pygmies struggle along down here. But that is not what this is saying at all. Heaven is not some distant place. In the Bible, heaven always means the invisible world of reality, what is going on that we cannot see but yet is really there. God is in that realm, and that is why he sees much more than we do.

As I look out on this congregation this morning I see your bodies. They reveal certain things -- some of you are interested, some of you are asleep. If I were to pray for you, however, there is no way I could understand the tremendous complexity and depth of struggle that many of you are going through. But God does. God not only sees you, he sees what is inside of you, what even you cannot see. He sees your heredity, your environment, your struggles. He sees every one of us that way. Remember that when you are dealing with God. When he speaks to you through his word, that word is so much more true than anything you can come up with as an explanation of life because God sees all of life, from beginning to end. He is in heaven and you upon earth, so for heaven's sake, don't start griping about what God has handed you. That is the Searcher's argument.

The saints have had to learn this lesson from time immemorial. It is reflected in a hymn by William Cowper,

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never ending skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will.  
You fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds you so much dread,



are big with mercies, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

"God is in heaven and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few," the Searcher says. "For a dream comes with much business." By this he means fantasies, and fantasizing produces much activity but accomplishes nothing. So also a fool with his many words of complaint accomplishes nothing.

Secondly, he says, "Don't play games with God!" Verse 4:

**When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools.  
Pay what you vow. {Ecc1 5:4 RSV}**

God is a realist. He never plays games with us. He sees things the way they really are and he tells us the way they are. God expects us to carry out our word. It is dangerous to make superficial promises about what we are going to do if he will only do this or that. He hears our promises, and he takes us at our word. There is a penalty when we do not keep it. This ought to teach us to be careful about what we promise God. Do not do that, for he is not pleased with fools.

In fact, the Searcher goes on to say,

**It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger [the priest, the pastor or the representative of God] it was a mistake; {Ecc1 5:5-6a RSV}**

Do not say, "I didn't really mean that." How many have said this about their wedding vows. God takes you at your word.

**... why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase, empty words grow many: but do you fear God? {Ecc1 5:6b-7 RSV}**

You are dealing with the Author of life itself. He holds your existence in the palm of his hand. God is not cruel and heartless; he is loving but he is real, so do not play games with him. Be honest with God; that is all the Searcher is saying. So pay attention when you are hearing the words of God. Listen as he describes life to you. He is telling you so that you might find enjoyment in all that you do.

Thirdly, value government; it too is from God. Verse 8:

**If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and right violently taken away, do not be amazed at the matter [do not be bitter over this]; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. But in all, a king is an advantage to a land with cultivated fields. {Ecc1 5:8-9 RSV}**

The argument is very simple: do not be astonished and bitter. God has set up higher officials who may correct oppression when they become aware of it. But even if they do not, there is One yet higher. He is aware, and he knows what he is doing. Recognize that there is good in government. Someone has well said, "Even bad government is better than no government at all." We cannot live in anarchy. Even the worst kind of government is better than no government at all. Value that. It will help in dealing with the problems of life.

Then the Searcher takes a fourth circumstance. Most people feel that if they could only get rich they could handle the pressures and the problems of life. This section runs from Verses 10-17.

**He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with gain: this also is vanity. {Ecc1 5:10 RSV}**

First, money will not satisfy you; money will not leave you feeling full and enjoying life. There is plenty of testimony to that today.

Secondly,

**When goods increase, they increase who eat them; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? {Ecc 5:11 RSV}**

That is, you will soon discover that a crowd of parasites gather around you to spend your money for you; you get nothing out of them but expense.

He develops this even further:

**Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep. {Ecc 5:12 RSV}**

A second disadvantage to having money is that you worry about how to take care of your property. You stay awake nights, worrying about how to keep what you have.

There is still a third disadvantage:

**There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; and he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. {Ecc 5:13-14 RSV}**

You can lose your riches too. They can disappear overnight. A turn of the wheel, a drop in the Dow Jones Averages and your fortune is gone.

Finally, riches will not survive death, but you will:

**As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil, which he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: Just as he came, so shall he go; and what gain has he that he toiled for the wind, and spent all his days in darkness and grief, in much vexation and sickness and resentment? {Ecc 5:15-17 RSV}**

You can take absolutely nothing away with you. Life is empty and meaningless for so many people. They suffer from "Destination Sickness"; having arrived at where they always wanted to be, and having everything they always wanted to have, they do not want anything they've got.

Once again we come to the true answer in the closing words of the chapter:

**Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot. Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil -- this is the gift of God. {Ecc 5:18-19 RSV}**

Enjoyment does not come from possessions, or from riches. Nor does it come from companionship, from popularity and fame, from the approval and the admiration of others. Enjoyment comes by knowing the Living God and taking everything from his hand with thanksgiving, whether it be pain or pleasure. That is the gift of God, and that is the lesson of this great book.

Notice how the chapter closes:

**For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. {Ecc 5:20 RSV}**

Have you ever met people like that? They have lived a full life, but they never talk about the past. Some people live in the past.

William Randolph Hearst, who amassed one of the great fortunes of our time, ended his days amidst all the opulence and splendor of the castle which he built in Southern California, sitting in a basement, playing over and over again the movies of his paramour from Hollywood, in an effort to eke out a degree of enjoyment from the past.

When people discover the richness of life which God has provided they do not think of the past, or even talk about it. They do not talk about the future either because they are so richly involved with the savor of life right now.

How good it is to know the Living God, to know that he controls what comes into your life. He expects you to make choices; Scripture always encourages that. But rejoice in the wisdom of a Father's heart, and richly enjoy what is handed you day-by-day; that is the secret of life. Such a one "will not much remember the days of his life" because God will keep him occupied "with joy in his heart."

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## THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

by Ray C. Stedman

Anyone who listens to newscasts these days knows that the economic news is pretty bad. We are facing a tremendous recession in the United States. In some places it is being described as a return to The Great Depression. Someone has said that a recession is when your neighbor loses his job, while a depression is when you lose yours. Unemployment is reaching record levels in many parts of our country. To face the coming winter, a bleak and empty season, without a job is a fearful and painful prospect for many. We are all facing to one degree or another the hard times ahead. That makes everyone's heart sink a little; we tend to react emotionally to these circumstances.

Yet our view of life may be so distorted that if hard times actually do come to us they may be the best years of our lives. That is what the Searcher tells us this morning in the passage we will be looking at in Ecclesiastes 6, where he declares that things are not what they seem to be. We think life is one way and it turns out to be something quite different. The thesis of our passage this morning is that we may be reading everything that is happening to us entirely wrong.

In Chapter 6, the *Qoheleth*, the Searcher of Israel, says that prosperity may not always be good; and in the first fourteen verses of Chapter 7 he takes up the opposite and accompanying truth -- that adversity may not always be bad. What we need, of course, is a true view of good and evil: how to tell good when it is good, and how to recognize evil for what it is. We would save ourselves much heartache if we could do that. The wonderful thing about Scripture is that it does just that. The Searcher here gives us the true view of good and evil.

In Chapter 6 he sets out four statements about prosperity to show us that material wealth and abundance are not always good. Here is the first statement:

**There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon men: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction. {Ecc 6:1-2 RSV}**

Immediately, the *Qoheleth* recognizes that to have abundance and possessions -- all that money can buy -- and yet lack the power to enjoy them is a very heavy burden to bear. Many people suffer from this. They drive shiny new cars, they have the latest electronic equipment in their big luxurious homes, which they are trying desperately to enjoy, yet their faces have a hollowness about them, their eyes betray an emptiness inside. I have on occasion stepped into the casinos up in Reno or Las Vegas to see what these places look like. There I saw people intent on finding riches, on getting more enjoyment out of life, but they looked like death warmed over. They sit there, unsmiling, pulling those one-armed bandits, but they have no sense of enjoyment, they project no feeling that there is anything pleasurable about what they are doing; rather they are involved in deadly serious work. What a boring thing that is! Observe the jaded lives of those who have everything but cannot enjoy anything they have.

Furthermore, the Searcher says, material wealth and abundance can be frustrating: imagine a stranger enjoying what you cannot enjoy. Can there be anything more frustrating than getting something you always wanted to have, and then discovering that it had lost its luster, you no longer enjoyed it, so you passed it on to somebody else who could not afford it and he had a ball with it? That would make one very frustrated, even resentful: "Why couldn't I enjoy it?" he would be entitled to ask.

The key to all of this is in the words, "God does not give him power to enjoy." That lesson is pounded home to our hearts over and over again throughout this book. Enjoyment does not reside in increased possessions, it is a gift which God must give. If he withholds it, no amount of effort is going to extract enjoyment from things. That is a difficult lesson for some to learn. We are constantly bombarded with alluring pictures in catalogs and in commercials that shout at us the opposite message. Enjoyment, however, is a gift of God.

The question that immediately comes to mind is, Why would God withhold enjoyment? Why would he not give the power to enjoy if he gives the ability to have? The answer to that question is given in this book, and it is especially clearly stated in Chapter 2, Verses 25-26, where the Searcher says,

**... for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; {Eccl 2:25-26a RSV}**

"To the man who pleases him." Again, I am afraid many people read that as though it means that some level of religious performance, some standard of morality, like joining a church or coming to meetings, is what pleases God. We must understand that the Scriptures never say that. Faith is what pleases God, believing him, taking him at his word and acting upon that word. This is what pleases God: obedience based upon faith. To such a man or woman God gives the gift of enjoying whatever he or she has. How little or how much it may be, is a gift poured out and taken from his hand. That is why gratitude, to be grateful for what you get, is the most important element of our lives.

How contrary this is to the spirit of our age! Shouted at us on every side today is the philosophy that we have a right to things. Television commercials in particular constantly tell us this. They hold up some alluring object that they want you to buy, and accompany it with a propaganda line that says, in one way or another, "You deserve this. You've got it coming to you. If you were being treated rightly this is what you ought to have." That is the spirit of our age. Do we realize that that contradicts the teaching that the Bible sets forth about our relationship to God? How can we have gratitude if we are only getting what we deserve? We cannot be grateful for that. Gratitude only comes when we feel we do not deserve something but we get it anyway.

All through the Scriptures we are told that the proper relationship of a believer to God, and that which pleases him, is to give thanks for everything: "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God concerning you," {1 Th 5:18 KJV}. This book of wisdom exhorts us to receive everything with a grateful heart, realizing that we do not have it coming, it is a gift of God. Even if it is painful for the moment, there is a wise Father who has chosen it for you, and it will yield to you great and rich benefits. You can be grateful for the pain as well as the pleasure; that is the lesson of this book.

The Searcher's second statement is that long life and a big family without the gift of enjoyment to accompany it is a grievous and hurtful thing. Verse 3:

**If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth [a stillborn baby] is better off than he. For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. Even though he should live a thousand years twice told [two thousand years], yet enjoy no good -- do not all go to the one place? {Ecc 6:3-6 RSV}**

Even a big family, which usually brings much cheer, excitement and pleasure to life -- even a long life and many children and grandchildren -- will not of themselves meet man's deep hunger for contentment. It will still leave him restless, unhappy, perhaps involved in quarrels and family strife, leaving the heart unsatisfied. Without the gift of enjoyment nothing will satisfy, nothing will produce long-lasting joy.

If such is the case, the Searcher says, even a stillborn baby is better off. The writer gives reasons for this. First, a stillborn infant has no history to live down: "It comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered." No one knows anything about it, it has no history, so no one can put it down or in any way attack it. Furthermore, it will not experience trouble, but the wealthy man will: "It has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he." Even long life, two thousand years of life, would not help. Both the stillborn baby and the wealthy man who lives a long life without enjoyment end in the same place; neither finds the gift of enjoyment.

The third point which the Searcher makes is found in Verses 7-9:

**All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a striving after wind. {Ecc 6:7-9 RSV}**

Here he is pointing out how man is incapable of finding joy by his own effort. Hard work will not do it: "All the toil of man is for his mouth." Toil is designed to satisfy man's appetite to find pleasure and contentment, but hard work and a desperate drive to satisfy oneself along these lines will never work; it will not produce lasting pleasure.

Nor will wisdom, or even charm. Of wisdom, he says, "What advantage has the wise man over the fool?" You may be wise in your investments, careful with your money, you may pursue pleasure moderately, but it is still not going to work; if that is all you have you are no different than the fool. Even a poor man who learns how to attract others to himself by means of his charming personality ("who knows how to conduct himself before the living") is still left empty, lonely and miserable inside.

The reason all this is so is given in the closing verses of this chapter. Verse 10:

**Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. {Ecc 6:10 RSV}**

-- the unalterable decree of God. The Searcher is telling us here that God has decreed that enjoyment cannot be found by effort, by work, and by the pursuit of pleasure. Enjoyment must be taken as a gift from God's hand; that decree is as unalterable as the law of gravity. You may not agree with God about it, you may not like it, but there it is; it cannot be changed.

The Searcher points out three things about this:

First, God decreed it before man was ever created: "Whatever has come to be has already been named" -- before it happened. Even man did not come to be before he was named in the mind and thought of God; and God created this strange law of life before man ever appeared on earth.

Secondly, it was decreed in view of what man is: "It is known what man is." God made us. He knows what

we are like, how we function, what will satisfy and what will not. In view of that, he set up this decree that enjoyment cannot be found from the possession of things. Jesus stated that very plainly: "A man's life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesses."

Then, thirdly, the Searcher says that it was decreed in spite of man: "He is not able to dispute with one stronger than he." How are you going to change the laws of God? They govern your life whether you like it or not. Though this may appear to be very much against us, nevertheless there is nothing we can do about it.

Arguing, he goes on to say, does not help. Verse 11:

**The more words, the more vanity, and what is man the better? {Ecc 6:11 RSV}**

C.S. Lewis said it so well: "To argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all." How do you change that?

The Searcher goes on to speak of the weakness of man. There are two reasons why this law cannot be changed: first, because God decreed it; and secondly, because man is so limited. Verse 12:

**For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? {Ecc 6:12 RSV}**

He asks two questions:

First, Who knows true value in life? Where is the man who understands what is good and what is bad? None of us does, and so the Searcher asks, "Who knows what is good for man?" Did you ever wish for something you thought was just right for you and then when you got it you wished you didn't have it? A high school boy said to me once, "I prayed, 'Lord, if I could just go with that beautiful girl I'd be the happiest boy alive.' Then we got acquainted. We went out a few times together, and I found myself praying, 'Lord, if I could just get rid of this girl I'd be the happiest guy alive!'" "Who knows what is good for man?" Surely we do not.

Then the second question, Who knows what is coming in the future: "Who can tell man what will be after him?" Who knows what the results of our present choices are going to be? Given our limited, narrow vision of what life is -- which is true of the smartest and most erudite among us -- what business have we got complaining to God about how our life is run?

If prosperity is not always good, as he has clearly shown, then it is equally true that adversity is not always bad. Suppose the hard times do come? Many good and even great things can come out of that.

In Chapter 7 a series of proverbs list the good things that can happen in affliction. Here is the first one:

**A good name is better than precious ointment;  
And the day of death, than the day of birth. {Ecc 7:1 RSV}**

There is a play on words here. The Hebrew word for name is *shem*, and the Hebrew word for ointment or perfume, is *shemen*. The Searcher is saying that a good *shem* is better than precious *shemen*. This, of course, is referring to perfume, which has an ability to attract others.

I have concluded that there is nothing more extravagant or more unrelated to reality than a perfume advertisement on television. It tries to convince you that spraying a little of a certain perfume on you will cause others to react in remarkable ways. People of the opposite sex will follow you down the street, you will step into romantic situations that are filled with sensuous delights -- all this just by buying their perfume. This is ridiculous. Why do you people watch these kinds of things? I watch them only for illustrative purposes!

In this proverb the Searcher is saying that a good name is truly influential. It is not like perfume, which does not do anything near what it is said to do. A good name endures. One will pass by a lot of garish looking

restaurants to go to some little hole-in-the-wall that serves good food at a decent price. A good name attracts. Even the poorest among us can have a name for integrity, for trustworthiness. Even though there be affliction and adversity -- you may not be able to afford Chanel No. 5 and other expensive perfumes -- but you can always afford a good name.

Another aspect of adversity is the lessons that sorrow teaches. Verse 2:

**It is better to go to the house of mourning  
than to go to the house of feasting;  
for this is the end of all men,  
and the living will lay it to heart. {Eccl 7:2 RSV}**

That is, when you are confronted with death you are no longer dealing with side issues, you are dealing at last with realities. Death leads to realism. Though it will bring sorrow, grief and mourning, you set aside the shallow, ephemeral aspects of life and start to deal with the facts.

Secondly, the Searcher says, sorrow leads to gladness. Verse 3:

**Sorrow is better than laughter,  
for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad. {Eccl 7:3 RSV}**

Not only gladness, but wisdom. Verse 4:

**The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;  
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. {Eccl 7:4 RSV}**

How can that be? How can sorrow, grief, adversity and pain lead to gladness and wisdom? Anybody who has been through a painful trial, however, knows that it is true.

Recently I have been reading excerpts from John Ehrlichman's testimony of his life, *Witness To Power*. He was, under Richard Nixon, one of the most powerful men in the United States for a while, but he became involved in Watergate and went to jail for some of his dealings during that terrible time. I would like to read you a few excerpts of his account of his life before and after the days of Watergate, taken from the last chapter of his book. He says:

When I went to jail, nearly two years after the cover-up trial, I had a big self-esteem problem. I was a felon, shorn and scorned, clumping around in a ragged old army uniform, doing pick and shovel work out on the desert. I wondered if anyone thought I was worth anything... For years I had been able to sweep most of my shortcomings and failures under the rug and not face them, but during the two long criminal trials, I spent my days listening to prosecutors tell juries what a bad fellow I was. Then at night I'd go back to a hotel room and sit alone thinking about what was happening to me. During that time I began to take stock.

He goes on to talk about how his marriage failed, and about how he went off by himself, seeking solitude on the cold and windy shores of Oregon, where he stayed in a cabin:

I stayed about two weeks. Every day I read the Bible, walked on the beach and sat in front of my fireplace thinking and sketching, with no outline or agenda. I had no idea where all this was leading or what answers I'd find. Most of the time I didn't even know what the questions were. I just watched and listened. I was wiped out. I had nothing left that had been of value to me -- honor, credibility, virtue, recognition, profession -- nor did I have the allegiance of my family. I had managed to lose that too...

He moved to New Mexico and started life over in Santa Fe. Here are the closing words of the book:

Since about 1975 I have begun to learn to see myself. I care what I perceive about my integrity, my capacity to love and be loved, and my essential worth. I don't miss Richard Nixon very much, and Richard Nixon probably doesn't miss me much either. I can understand that. I've made no effort to be in touch. We had a professional relationship that went as sour as a relationship can, and no one likes to be reminded of bad times. Those interludes, the Nixon episodes in my life, have ended. In a paradoxical way, I'm grateful for them.

Somehow I had to see all of that and grow to understand it in order to arrive at the place where I find myself now.

What a confirmation of the truth that the Searcher is telling us here! Through times of sorrow and adversity we begin to understand the reality of our lives.

No wonder he adds to this immediately the words of Verse 5:

**It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise  
than to hear the song of fools.  
For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,  
so is the laughter of the fools;  
this also is vanity. {Eccl 7:5-6 RSV}**

Oftentimes a rebuke will help more than foolish songs and hollow laughter. Adversity can be of much benefit to us.

Still another benefit is found in Verses 7-10:

**Surely oppression makes the wise man foolish,  
and a bribe corrupts the mind. {Eccl 7:7 RSV}**

Here he is dealing with the adversity itself. If you suffer an injustice and somebody oppresses you, or if somebody bribes another to attack you, that is hard for the human spirit to bear; you want to strike back. But, he says, wait:

**Better is the end of a thing than its beginning;  
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.  
Be not quick to anger,  
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools. {Eccl 7:8-9 RSV}**

I do not think anything has been more of a problem in my own life than a short fuse, a quick move to anger. To learn to be patient in spirit is one of the great lessons that adversity can teach us.

Then he adds to that,

**Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"  
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. {Eccl 7:10 RSV}**

Looking back, it all looks so good, but living through those times wasn't any better than now. In fact, ten years from now you will look back on today as the good old days, so remember what they were like.

Finally, he speaks about wisdom:

**Wisdom is good with an inheritance,  
an advantage to those who see the sun. {Eccl 7:11 RSV}**

That is, if you learn to be wise and thoughtful about life it has advantages for you.

He continues:

**For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money [it can spare you a lot of problems];  
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.  
{Eccl 7:12 RSV}**

He grants that. Out of adversity can come wisdom, and that has its advantages.



But now he comes back again to his conclusion:

**Consider the work of God;  
who can make straight what he has made crooked? {Ecl 7:13 RSV}**

Under the symbol of crookedness come all those things we call adversities -- painful experiences, injustices, mistreatment, poverty, sickness, accidents, whatever. His question is, "Who can straighten out what God has made crooked?" God did this, as he goes on to say in Verse 14:

**In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, {Ecl 7:14a RSV}**

Prosperity and adversity both come from God's hands; a wise Father's heart has given them to you. In the words of the hymn,

Day by day and with each passing moment,  
Strength I find to meet my trials here;  
Trusting in my Father's wise,  
I've no cause for worry or for fear.

God has given all these to us, the Searcher declares. We must then learn to accept and understand that God has chosen these for us out of love and wisdom. They have a special purpose, which he gives us in these last words:

**God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. {Ecl 7:14b RSV}**

In other words, God has designed life to be full of the unexpected so that we might realize that we do not control our future.

We are not in charge of life. The great Satanic lie that subtly comes at us a thousand times a day is that we are gods, we are in charge, we can plan, we can direct, we can control. In the freedom of will that we are gods, we are in charge, we can plan, we can direct, we can control. In the freedom of will that God has granted us there is enough truth to that that we easily believe the rest, that we are in ultimate control of everything. But the lesson of the Scripture, driven home again and again, is, that is not true. God is in charge. What he sends us is always designed to benefit. This is the clear teaching of the Scripture, both in the Old and the New Testament alike. Even though adversity may have painful aspects, we are to understand that it comes from a loving God, and be grateful for it.

An unknown poet has written,

When God wants to drill a man,  
And thrill a man,  
And skill a man;  
When God wants to mold a man  
To play the noblest part,  
When he yearns with all his heart  
To create so great and bold a man  
That all the world shall be amazed,  
Watch his methods, watch his ways --

How he ruthlessly perfects  
Whom he royally elects.  
How he hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows, converts him  
Into trial shapes of clay  
Which only God understands.

While his tortured heart is crying,  
And he lifts beseeching hands.  
How he bends but never breaks  
When his good he undertakes.  
How he uses  
Whom he chooses,  
And with every purpose, fuses him,  
By every act, induces him  
To try his splendor out.  
God knows what he's about.

### **Prayer:**

Thank you, Father, for these very wise words. Thank you for the way in which they underscore and underlie the very experiences we are going through right now. For some among us especially who may be facing sorrow, deep trouble and heartache, we pray these words may come with encouragement. For some of us who are not given adversity but prosperity, we pray that we may understand that these are gifts from a loving God, to be accepted with gratitude and with the realization that they can pass away tomorrow, but it is God who gives the gift of enjoyment. Help us then to cease this mad rush for material gain and concentrate rather on understanding and taking from your hand the gifts of love you send. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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## **WHOEVER SAID LIFE WAS FAIR?**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

The book of Ecclesiastes is the most exhaustive investigation ever made as to the value and profit of various lifestyles. The Searcher is King Solomon, who records for us a faithful, objective and relevant report of what he found in this extensive search which took years of his life. By the middle of the seventh chapter, to which we come today, he can say, "I have seen everything." In fact, he opens this section with those very words. Chapter 7:15:

**In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing. {Eccl 7:15 RSV}**

This central section of Ecclesiastes deals with how to properly and realistically evaluate life. We have seen already that prosperity is not always good; to be wealthy and materially well off is by no means the answer to the hunger of the human heart. We have also seen the corollary truth, that adversity is not always bad. Some of our best times are those times when we do not have much, when things are tough. In this section, beginning with Verse 15, we learn still another accompanying truth, and that is that the righteous are not always righteous. In fact, this section declares two great truths: first, that in the real world there is a lot of phony righteousness; and secondly, that true wisdom, therefore, is hard to find.

In Verse 15, the Searcher says that one cannot tell the righteous by whether they live a long time or not. In other words, as the proverb has it, "The good often die young." But the wicked can live to a ripe old age.

There is such a thing as a dirty old man! He does exist, and the bumper sticker tells us that he needs love like the rest of us.

Verses 16-19, where this truth is developed, is a greatly misunderstood passage. The Searcher says:

**Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself? Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city. {Ecl 7:16-19 RSV}**

That must be the favorite Scripture of many, because it seems to advocate moderation in both good and evil. The Searcher seems to be saying, "Do not be too righteous, and do not be too wicked either, but a little of both does not hurt." We have all heard somebody say, "Religion is all right in its place, but don't let it interfere with your pleasure." Moderation in all things, in other words.

In trying to understand this, however, we must notice very carefully what the Searcher is saying. The second verb of Verse 16, "Do not make yourself overwise," is the key to understanding the verse. In grammar this is called a reflexive verb; that is why the word yourself is included there. What the Searcher is really saying is, "Do not be wise to yourself; do not be wise in your own eyes, in regard to your righteousness."

This is a warning against self-righteousness, and properly so. Self-righteousness is the attitude of people who regard themselves as righteous because of the things they do not do. That is, in my judgment, the curse of the church today. The New Testament calls this Pharisaism; the Searcher rightly labels it wickedness. In our studies in the book of Job we learned that wickedness is expressed not only by murder, thievery and sexual misconduct, but also by bigotry, racism, pompousness, cold disdain; by critical, judgmental attitudes, by harsh, sarcastic words, by vengeful and vindictive actions. The evangelical prig, male or female, is a wicked person!

Not only is self-righteousness wicked, but the opposite extreme is wicked too, the Searcher goes on to say. The foolish casting off of all moral restraints, the abandoning of one's self discipline and going in for wild and riotous living also is wickedness.

Furthermore, each of these lifestyles is mutual self-destructive; they both result in the same thing: "Why should you destroy yourself?" he asks the self-righteous; "Why should you die before your time?" he says to the self-indulgent. In either case they destroy something of their humanity. This may be true even physically. The self-indulgent may die in a drunken brawl, or a car accident, while the self-righteous will probably die of ulcers, or a heart attack, or as a result of soft, indulgent living.

The proper attitude toward life is found in Verse 18:

**It is good that you should take hold of this [true righteousness] and from that [the wicked world in which we live] withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all. {Ecl 7:18 RSV}**

That is the consistent position of the Scripture, Old and New Testament alike. We are not to withdraw from the world in an attempt to escape its evil; we are not to gather our robes of righteousness about ourselves and look down our noses with disdain at those who live morally unrighteous lives. It is good to take hold of true righteousness, but it is also good to not withhold oneself from the world. Be out in it, live in it, be in touch with it. Do not seek to avoid it, to hide in a spiritual cocoon, but do not go along with its unrighteous and hurtful attitudes and practices.

The godly way to live, of course, is "He who fears God shall come forth from them all." We have seen this phrase, "The man who fears God," many times in this book. "To fear God" is a full-orbed truth. It means not only to respect God, but to acknowledge his presence in your life; not merely at the end of your life someday, but now. To fear God is to know that he sees all that you do, and that it is his hand that sends circumstances

into your life. The knowledge of God's power, wisdom and love, his willingness to accept you, to change you, to forgive you, to restore you and to stand by you, are all part of fearing God. "To fear God" is to know how to live in the midst of the world and yet not be self-righteous, priggish, smug and complacent. That kind of wisdom "gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city." It is better to learn to live that way than to have ten influential friends in high places who can bail you out!

This past week the media have daily been giving us information about DeLorean, the automobile magnate who has gotten into trouble trafficking in drugs. Here is one of the wealthiest men in the world at one time, with influential friends all over the country, spending his days in jail because no one would go the amount to bail him out. That is a commentary on what the Searcher found. The man or woman who learns to fear God in the full-orbed sense we have been talking about is much better off than one who has a passel of influential friends.

Solomon now sets forth the truth that we live in a fallen world. There is no righteousness, apart from the gift of God. All have been infected by the virus of evil, he declares in Verses 20-22:

**Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. {Ecc1 7:20 RSV}**

Do not add "except me" to that statement. The Scripture says this over and over. The Searcher goes on to tell us how we will know the truth of this:

**Do not give heed to all the things that men say, lest you hear your servant cursing you; your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others. {Ecc1 7:21-22 RSV}**

The unchanging position of Scripture is, as Paul declares in Romans 3, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," {Rom 3:23 KJV}. Isaiah puts it this way, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way," {Isa 53:6}. In the honesty of our hearts we know that. We can hear it if we listen to what people say, especially when they are angry, frustrated or upset about something. Listen to what Christians mutter under their breath when they are caught in traffic! That is why the Searcher says, "Don't take it too seriously."

This is a revelation of the fact that all of us live in a fallen world; we all struggle with a fallen nature which will manifest itself at any possible moment of weakness, frustration or anger. That is why, if you hear your servant cursing you, realize that he is suffering from the same problem as you. Do not take it so seriously that you get all upset and threaten to fire him, but remember that you are in the same boat. In fact, the Searcher invites you to remember that in your own heart you have done the same thing many times. How refreshingly honest the Scriptures are! They confront us with reality about life.

For the very reason that there is none righteous on the earth, the Searcher concludes in the latter half of this chapter, that true, godly wisdom is very hard indeed to find. He looked for it:

**All this I have tested by wisdom; I have said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness. {Ecc17:23-25 RSV}**

We have seen before how he described the search, the earnest, long search that he undertook to investigate all philosophies, seeking to discover the secret of life. He says that he had sought it in himself first of all. Remember that this was written by King Solomon, who was noted in his own time as the wisest man in the world. With that reputation for wisdom he sought in his own life to find the secret. As he puts it here, "I said, 'I will be wise', but it was far from me." What an honest confession! He found himself short-changed, unable to understand himself.

There is probably no one thing that we are more confident of than this notion that we know ourselves. How many times have you heard someone say, "No one understands me"? The clear implication is, "I alone understand me." The revelation of Scripture, however, is that if there is one person in this world you do not

know it is you; you do not understand yourself. We will be puzzled and confused if we try to solve the riddles of life by thinking we understand ourselves. "That which is far off and deep, very deep, who can find it out?" asks Solomon. He realizes that the issue lies deep within himself. To try to understand yourself is very difficult. It is like a man trying to look at his own face without using a mirror. The Searcher found it impossible to solve the riddles of his own feelings because he did not understand himself.

He goes on to tell us that as he sought he realized that what he was looking for was the secret of the mystery of evil. Have you ever wrestled with that? Have you ever said to yourself after you had done something, "Why did I do that? I knew it was wrong, I knew it would hurt somebody, why did I say that?" You were wrestling with the same problem the Searcher faced, that great question, the mystery of evil. The Searcher says he did not find the answer by wisdom, by trying to reason it out. What he did find was very revealing. The first thing he discovered was what most of us find when we seek the key to our life apart from God -- bitterness and death:

**And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the Searcher, adding one thing to another to find the sum, which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices. {Eccl 7:26-29 RSV}**

This is a remarkable revelation of what a keenly intelligent and very resourceful man found out about life. We must remember, Solomon is honestly recording his own experience.

He found two things: first, he found that he was trapped by sexual seductions. He went looking for love. Many a man or woman here this morning can echo what he is saying. He went looking for love, and thought he would find it in a relationship with a woman. He went looking for that which would support him, strengthen him and make him feel life was worth the living, but what he found was nothing but a fleeting sexual thrill. He found himself involved with a woman who did not give him what he was looking for at all; he still felt the same empty loneliness as before.

I read an article by a young woman who told about how she sought the answer to the hungers of her life in one relationship after another with men. She said she woke up one morning lying in bed with a man she had met just the night before. As she looked at this male sleeping beside her, she said she felt the most intense loneliness she had ever experienced. She realized then that sex was compounding, not solving, the emptiness and loneliness of her life. She went on to talk about how she found a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus and became a Christian, and testified to the fullness she found in that relationship. What a confirmation her record is of what we have here in this passage.

The Searcher also honestly records the way of escape: "He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her." We must remember that this is the man who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines; he was involved sexually with one thousand women. In all that experience, sexual athlete that he was, he found nothing to satisfy the searchings of his heart. But, he says, he did come to realize that the man who fears God, who understands God, whose eyes are opened and whose heart is taught by the word of God, will escape this. In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, which Solomon also wrote, he passes on his experience along this line to young men to show them how to escape this kind of empty experience in their lives.

Not only did he find himself trapped by sexual seductiveness, but he says he was also puzzled by a strange enigma, recorded in Verses 27-28: "One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found." We must read this carefully. As he went through life he occasionally found a loyal, trustworthy, godly, wise man who could be a true friend, a man of integrity, but he never found a woman like that; out of the thousand women he was involved with, he never found one whom he could trust. Why? Surely it was not because Solomon was a male chauvinist pig, as some of you may perhaps be tempted to think. In Chapter 8 of Proverbs he uses a woman to symbolize true, godly wisdom, and in the 31st chapter of Proverbs he holds up a woman as the supreme example of one who lives a life pleasing to God; that chapter is known around the earth for its exaltation of godly womanhood. Solomon was not a woman hater; that was not his problem.

We can understand why he says what he honestly records here because of what was going in his search. His problem was that when he sought to relate to a woman he was stymied by the fact of immediate sexual involvement, and that canceled out discovering who the woman really was. That is the explanation for his words here. Solomon had no such problem with men. He was not gay. When he sought to relate to a man he could understand him, hear him and realize what was going on inside, unhindered by any sexual detours, but not so with a woman.

One of the most important lessons we must learn about life is that sex outside of marriage arrests the mutual process of discovery. You cannot discover who you are or who another person is when you are involved together in wrongful sex. I have seen this happen many times with young couples in this congregation who were obviously growing in the Lord, who began to know one another, to love one another, to discover things they liked and disliked, and then suddenly the relationship soured, a weirdness set in, things went wrong, and they began to quarrel and fight. Invariably it turned out that they gave way to their temptations and had gone into sexual experiences together, absolutely canceling out every attempt to discover who the other one was. The Scriptures warn us carefully about pre-marital sex. This is why the Searcher has to record, "I could find a real man among a thousand, but I never found a woman like that." I am sure there were women like that among those he knew, but he could never find one.

Finally, he sums this all up in Verse 29:

**Behold, this alone I found, that God made man [that is, both male and female] upright  
,but they have sought out many devices. {Eccl 7:29 RSV}**

The trouble of this world is not with God, but with man. Because we will not heed the wisdom of God and the word of God, we seek to find ways to circumvent what he is telling us, to find the richness of life despite, or apart from, the rules of life that he has set forth. It cannot be done. The inevitable discovery of an honest search is that life can never be found except where God says it is found -- in a relationship with him.

So the Searcher concludes this section, in Verse 1 of Chapter 8, with a description of the value of true, godly wisdom. Here is another of those misplaced chapter divisions. We ought to read this as the closing part of Chapter 7:

**Who is like the wise man?  
And who knows the interpretation of a thing:  
A man's wisdom makes his face shine,  
and the hardness of his countenance is changed. {Eccl 8:1 RSV}**

There is a marvelous, fourfold description of what happens to one who discovers the true wisdom of righteousness as a gift from God, one who walks with God, in the fear of God.

First, it will make that person a unique human being: "Who is like the wise man?" One of the follies of life is to try to imitate somebody else. The media constantly bombard us with subtle invitations to look like, dress or talk like some popular idol. If you succeed in that, of course, you will be nothing but a cheap imitation of another person. The glory of the good news is that when you become a new creature in Jesus Christ you will be unique. There will be no one like you. You will become more and more like Christ, but unlike everyone else, in personality. You will be uniquely yourself. You will not be a copy, a cheap imitation, but an original from the Spirit of God. That is the first and most wonderful thing about salvation.

Secondly, the Searcher says, godly wisdom will give you a secret knowledge: "Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" The implication of that question is that the wise man knows. This is what Paul declares in First Corinthians 2: "The spiritual man judges all things," {1 Cor 2:15a RSV}. The spiritual man is in a position to pass moral judgment on the value of everything, not because he is so smart, but because the God who teaches him is wise.

Thirdly, such a man will experience a visible joy: "A man's wisdom makes his face shine." Grace is what makes the face shine, not grease. Grease is what they put in cosmetics to make the face shine or to take away

the shine, as the case may be, but it is grace that does it from within; grace makes the face shine because it is joy visibly expressed on the human face.

Finally, it changes the very inner disposition of a person: "The hardness of his countenance is changed." Have you ever watched somebody under the impact of the Spirit of God in his life soften, mellow and grow easier to live with? That is the work of the Spirit of God.

We could illustrate that truth with a thousand people here this morning, but I choose to close this with a famous Christian of some generations ago. All of us, whether we know it or not, have sung the hymns of John Newton. One of our favorite hymns was written by him, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound -- that saved a wretch like me!" That is John Newton's story. He was raised by a godly mother, who prayed for him all his life. As soon as he came of age, he joined the slave trade, running slaves from Africa to England. He fell into wild, riotous living, involving himself in drunken brawls. He ended up at last, as he himself confesses, "a slave of slaves," actually serving some of the escaped slaves on the African coast, wretched, miserable and hardly even alive. Then he found voyage on a ship back to England. In the midst of a terrible storm in the Atlantic when he feared for his life, he was converted; he remembered his mother's prayers, and he came to Christ. One of his famous hymns is his own testimony:

In evil long I took delight, unawed by shame or fear,  
Until a new object met my sight, and stopped my wild career.  
I saw One hanging on a tree in agony and blood,  
Who fixed his languid eyes on me as near his cross I stood.  
Sure, never till my latest breath shall I forget that look.  
It seemed to charge me with his death, though not a word he spoke.  
A second look he gave, which said, "I freely all forgive;  
My blood was for thy ransom paid, I died that thou mayest live."

And live he did! He became one of the great Christians of England, author of many, many hymns in which he sought to set forth the joy, the radiance, the gladness of his life as he found it in Jesus Christ.

I hope this passage will help us understand afresh that what we regard oftentimes as the restrictions and limitations of life which God sets before us are not designed to keep us from joy. Joy is God's purpose for us. These apparent restrictions are designed to guard it so that we find it in the right way and at the right time, and then life will start to unfold in fullness and gladness before us.

Here the Searcher has clearly declared what he emphasizes throughout the whole book of Ecclesiastes: That it is the man or woman who finds the Living God who discovers the answer to the riddles of life.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, how grateful we are for the honesty of your Word, for its clear and careful warnings about devious paths that many of us are tempted to go down, and yet without rancor or threat these words come to us offering a way of escape, a way of life that will indeed satisfy. Though it may bring pain and hardship at times, it will be from a Father's loving hand. Grant to us that we will take these words very seriously and begin to find them fulfilled in our own experience. We ask in the name of Jesus our Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us that we might find life in his name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman

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# CAN WE TRUST GOVERNMENT?

by Ray C. Stedman

The passage to which we come today, in Chapter 8 of the book of Ecclesiastes, deals directly with a current phenomenon, and that is, the growing resistance to governmental control of individual lives, especially as that control includes the right to draft young men for war. You may not have realized that this ancient book deals with that very current problem, but it does. As we look at the passage we hope to get some light on who is right, those who say, "Hell no! We won't go," or those who say, "It's not whacky to wear khaki!"

The Searcher's comment on this emerges from a section which deals with the question of how rightly to view good and evil. We have already seen that prosperity is not always good, nor is adversity always evil. In Chapter 7 we saw that despite the phony righteousness which abounds in religious circles in our day, there is a true wisdom that can be found.

Today, in Chapter 8, beginning with Verse 2, we will see that, despite injustice in government, nevertheless, there are proper powers which government wields. Many of you will recognize immediately that this is exactly in line with the Apostle Paul's word in Romans 13 about the powers of government. I commend that parallel passage, the first seven verses of Romans 13, for your own study.

Chapter 8, Verse 2:

**Keep the king's command, and because of your sacred oath be not dismayed; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" He who obeys a command will meet no harm, and the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. {Ecl 8:2-5 RSV}**

In that very remarkable passage, the Searcher, King Solomon himself, head of state of the nation of Israel, is teaching us three great Scriptural reasons why we should obey government. The first of these reasons he sets forth in Verse 2: obey because you are a citizen of that government. This is what he means by, "because of your sacred oath." Every citizen of the United States has taken, in some form or another, an oath of allegiance to support the government of the United States. If you are a naturalized citizen you actually took an oath like that when you became a citizen. If you are a natural-born citizen, as most of us are, you reflected that oath whenever you said the Pledge of Allegiance:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America  
and to the Republic for which it stands...

This is what is referred to in Chapter 8 as a "sacred oath." One translation puts this, "Keep the king's command as though it were an oath unto God." This underscores the seriousness of citizenship, that, by virtue of sharing the blessings of government in a nation such as ours, we are also responsible to obey the proper powers and laws of that government. There is the first reason this passage teaches why we should obey government.

There is a clear suggestion here that this is not always going to be pleasant. Verse 2 says, "because of your sacred oath be not dismayed." That is, there will be times when obeying the government will not be very convenient, when it will interfere with other things you want to do. For instance, to be summoned for jury duty just as you are leaving for vacation is not very convenient. If you are hit by a zoning restriction in regard to some change you want to make in your home, or some building you want to erect, that is not very pleasant either; nor is paying your taxes when you feel that they are a heavy burden.

This is a recognition that, to the ordinary citizen, obedience is not based upon convenience, but rather it is a responsibility we owe because, as Paul says in Romans 13, government is "ordained of God" {Rom 13:1 KJV}. Granted, sometimes this can be very unpleasant. Although there are times when we all would agree



with Will Rogers, when he said, "We ought to be grateful that we don't have as much government as we've paid for!" Nevertheless, the theory and principle of government is clearly established in Scripture.

A second reason why we should obey government appears in Verses 3-4: We are to obey the government because it has power to compel us to do so.

**go from his [the king's] presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" {Eccl 8:3-4 RSV}**

We do not have a king in the United States -- at least we do not call him that -- but we do have a Head of State, and he represents the power and the authority of government. Here is a recognition that the government does have the right to compel, the right of force. Again, Paul reflects this in Romans 13: The government "does not bear the sword in vain," {Rom 13:4 RSV}. The Head of State has a right to do this.

No more eloquent or adequate statement of this right has ever been made than that contained in the words of the great documents that underlie our American liberty, the Constitution of the United States, and the Declaration of Independence. Do you remember how the Constitution begins? I hope you have memorized these words:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The closing words of the Declaration of Independence are likewise filled with references to the purpose and function of government:

... and that, as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And, for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

Thus our Founding Fathers recognized what the Scriptures so clearly state, that government is ordained of God; it has power to function as such, and the citizen is responsible to obey, not only because of his oath of allegiance, but also because the government has power to compel.

The third reason, then, flows out of that:

**He who obeys a command will meet no harm, and the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. {Eccl 8:5 RSV}**

It is a very wise thing to obey the government. Obedience is to be taken for granted. How and when is another matter. (We will look into that in just a moment.) But another reason for obedience is that we will thus escape additional harassment from the governing powers. I have a friend who recently got a ticket for speeding. She ignored it, thinking that the matter would never come up again. (I find that many people today ignore such tickets.) The original fine for speeding was \$25, but because she ignored it, some months later she got an additional notice, saying that the fine had now advanced to \$145, with the clear implication that the longer she waited the larger the fine would grow. That is what this verse is talking about. My friend learned a very necessary lesson: the government has the power to compel; and the way to escape that harassment is to obey the government and pay the fine. So the right of government to compel is clearly established here; obedience is required as unto God.

What is left up to us, the time and the way, is developed in Verses 5-6:

**... the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. For every matter has its time and way, although man's trouble lies heavy upon him. {Eccl 8:5b-6 RSV}**

That takes us back to that wonderful passage in Chapter 3, where we are told that there is a time and a place for everything, that in God's great overall plan for every individual life there is provision made for sorrow and for rejoicing, for tears and for laughter, for war and for peace. Here we are reminded of that: "Every matter has its time and its way."

But we are given certain freedom in this as to the time and the way we obey. The words, "man's trouble," seem to suggest that it is not always easy to know how to obey, or when one should obey. There are many factors that would influence that, especially in this matter that we are facing more and more, the matter of the draft. When and how this should be carried out.

The fact that it is difficult is also part of God's program. As believers, we ought to understand that it is not always easy to know what God wants. He does not want it to be easy. We are not robots, given orders to go here or there, having no choice at all in the matter. God clearly does not want those kinds of sons and daughters; he tells us that. Yet that is really what we are asking for when we say to God, "Show me what you want me to do and I'll do it." In other words, "Compel me; give me orders and I'll carry them out." God does not do that. We often struggle, evaluate, weigh, think and puzzle over what we should do. God wants it that way; that is part of his plan.

The time is not always left up to us. Sometimes the law requires a certain time schedule. If you have to register for the draft, you have a certain length of time in which you must do it; if you have to pay your taxes, you have a certain deadline. But the Searcher says that a way can be found by "the wise man." Though it is not wrong to take advantage of provisions for hardship release, such as might be included in a draft law, for instance, nevertheless, the way to obey can be found in every individual circumstance if one is walking in the wisdom of God.

Another factor which influences us is found in Verse 7:

**For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? {Ecc1 8:7  
RSV}**

That raises the matter of uncertainty as to the results of obedience to government. One of the reasons we are not left up to our own devices as to whether we are going to obey the government or not is that we do not always know what God intends to work out by means of our obedience. He may have blessings for us that will come out of that relationship of obedience that we could not foresee.

As a young man in my twenties during World War II, I remember being faced with the very question of registration for the draft. At the time I was working for the railroad industry, which by its very nature allowed me to be deferred because that industry was essential to the conduct of the war. But as the war went on and I saw that my friends and all other young men of my age were enlisting in the service, I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable at that deferment.

Eventually I joined the Navy. Although I was unsure whether I was doing the right thing or not, I felt I ought to join. What I did not understand or realize was that the action I took would open a door which gave me what was perhaps the greatest opportunity I have ever had to teach the Scriptures to those who were in desperate need of such teaching. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor, and through that great port there passed from time to time all the sailors of the Pacific Fleet, many of them Christian young men who had won others to Christ aboard their ships. Along with others, I had the opportunity to have great Bible classes, with hundreds of sailors involved. All this was opened up to me because I was a member of the United States Navy myself.

Furthermore, I did not know that at the end of the war I would be granted the GI Bill of Rights, which would give me enough money to pay for my seminary training. In fact, it was rather remarkable that the time I had served in the Navy provided me with exactly the right amount to go through four years of seminary training; the month that I graduated from seminary the GI Bill ceased for me. I could not foresee all that, but God did. So it is possible that unexpected results will follow from obedience to what God has set before us to do with regard to government.

In Verse 8 the Searcher faces a very sticky point: the possibility of losing your life in obeying the government is clearly faced here:

**No man has power to retain the spirit, or authority over the day of death; there is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. {Ecl 8:8 RSV}**

That is a very remarkable verse. Three things are clearly stated. First, death is wholly in God's hands. He can take someone through the most terrible bombardment and preserve his life even though hundreds around him may fall. Many a soldier or sailor has said to himself, "Why did I survive when all my buddies were killed? What does God have for me that he would allow me to live?" I have had to ask that question myself, as dear Christian friends went down in various ships sunk in the Pacific in World War II. I have had to say to myself, "Why wasn't I on that ship?" Many a soldier has had to face the fact that God is saying to him, "I want to use your life." God is able to preserve it. The verse clearly states that death is wholly in his hands. No man has the power to retain the spirit when God calls it home; no one has authority to choose the day of his death; that is entirely in God's hands. That is one of the great encouraging things that a Christian who is facing military service ought to consider.

The second point that this verse states is that there is no discharge in time of war. War is an all-out effort by a nation to preserve something of integrity and value, and as such it requires the wholehearted commitment of all its citizens; there is no way out.

Last night I watched the moving television film, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, the true story of the only soldier since the Civil War to be executed for desertion. This very likable young man, who had had a rough time in his life, had finally found happiness with his new wife, and then he was drafted and put into battle. He was so shaken by that experience that he refused to fight any longer; he laid down his gun and ran away. Finally, he was arrested and tried for desertion. It was evident in the film that everyone involved from the governmental standpoint was anxious to preserve his life. Yet it became very clear that to allow him to escape would demoralize the whole system and open the door for thousands of others to refuse to face the demands of battle. It was the unanimous decision of court after court that he should be executed. Finally, his life was taken, testimony to what the Scriptures here declare: "there is no discharge from war." When a nation is facing a time of danger it is the duty of every citizen to come to its defense.

Yet the verse goes on to say this does not justify any kind of wicked, military violence: "Nor will wickedness [that is in the context military violence, wicked disobedience of the laws of life] deliver those who are given to it." A soldier can be as guilty of murder as any private citizen; he can disobey the laws of justice while he is wearing a uniform and while he is engaged in combat. This verse recognizes the fact that wicked violence is not justified thereby.

Many, perhaps, are uncomfortable at this point. You are probably asking yourselves, "Does that mean that government is always right? Don't governments do wrong at times?" The Searcher faces that in this next section. Verse 9:

**All this I observed while applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while man lords it over man to his hurt. {Ecl 8:9 RSV}**

There is an honest recognition of the fact that there is evil in government: "Man lords it over others to his own hurt." John Kenneth Galbraith put this very aptly when he said, "Under capitalism man exploits man; under communism it is exactly the reverse." Thereby he recognized the universality of evil.

All governments are evil, but where does the evil come from? It does not mean that government itself is wrong. Government comes from God, the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, tell us. But evil in government arises from the evil in fallen man, living in a fallen world. Who of us is free of evil? Who of us can claim absolute innocence for all we do? No one. There is none righteous, the Searcher found, there is no one who does not do evil. There is no government, therefore, that does not have evil within it.

He gives two very flagrant examples of this. Verses 10-11:

**Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. {Ecc 8:10 RSV}**

He had been to a funeral of some prominent government leader, a man whom everybody knew was a wretch and a reprobate, even though outwardly he appeared to be holy and righteous as he went in and out of the temple. But at his funeral he was being praised, exalted and glorified; none of his evil deeds were mentioned. That is evil.

We had a recent example of this in the death of President Brezhnev of the Soviet Union. He personally gave the order for the invasion of Afghanistan, and for the destruction of millions of innocent people in various parts of the world, but none of this was mentioned at his funeral. Rather, he received glowing tributes, and was buried as a Hero of the Soviet Union. We do not need to point the finger at Russia; we do the same thing over here. We have a lot of wretches who are buried in honorable graves, who are remembered as great leaders, yet they were wicked and violent men. I am reminded of the story of the woman who was at the funeral of her husband, who had been a notorious wretch and a criminal. On hearing the eloquent eulogy of him, what a wonderful man he was, etc., she said to her son, "Go up and see if that's your father that's in that coffin!"

The second example is found in Verse 11:

**Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set to do evil. {Ecc 8:11 RSV}**

What an honest, accurate observation on human life! We find abundant examples today of delays in justice which permit crime to increase and criminals to be encouraged. When justice is delayed or circumvented in any way, when judges turn loose criminals for technicalities when it is clear that they are guilty of outrageous crimes, this only encourages more crime. This is a clear picture of the evil that can be present in government.

Nevertheless, the Searcher finds cause for patience in the twofold promise that follows. Verses 12-14:

**Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him; but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.  
There is a vanity which takes place on earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked [righteous people being treated like they are wicked], and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous [obvious criminals being treated as though they were righteous]. I said this also is vanity. {Ecc 8:12-14 RSV}**

He clearly admits this, but two things encourage him. One, God will preserve his own despite what happens to their bodies. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell," (Matt 10:28{RSV}). That is, the claims of God take precedence over the threats of mankind; we are to walk in the light of that. God is able to take care of his own. In God's eyes, what happens to our bodies is not nearly as significant as what is happening to us. Those who walk in fear before God -- we have looked at this word, fear, which means love, respect, honor and willingness to obey -- will be kept by God, regardless of what happens to their bodies.

But second, God will judge the wrong in his own time. Though the sinner seems to get away with murder, and does the same thing a hundred times, nevertheless God is watching; an accounting will be made. Though the rewards of life seem to be reversed at times -- wicked men get what the righteous ought to have, righteous men get what the wicked deserve -- nevertheless the promise is that the wicked shall not "prolong his days like a shadow."

That is an interesting phrase which, I think refers to the wicked man's influence after his death. "Life prolonged like a shadow" is not real life; it is the influence of a man after his death. Reading through the course of history, it is remarkable that though they may have been praised and honored during their lives, following their deaths notoriously wicked men are always revealed to have been what they really were. Adolf Hitler and all the Nazis who were associated with him are now despised and abhorred for the most part around the world; they have not been able to prolong their days like a shadow. God works in life to bring truth and justice to light.

So the Searcher comes to the true conclusion -- this is where this book returns again and again -- in Verse 15:

**And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun. {Ecc 8:15 RSV}**

Do not misunderstand. That is not justification for living it up now, for saying, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." That philosophy is based upon the lie, the illusion that enjoyment comes from pleasant circumstances. If this book is teaching us any one thing it is telling us that that is not true. Enjoyment does not come from happy, pleasant circumstances, where everything is going the way we like it. That is what the world believes; that is what underlies all the television commercials of our day, the magazine ads, etc. No, according to this book, enjoyment is a gift of God which can accompany even difficult and hard circumstances; that is why he encourages us to it. True enjoyment, true contentment does not come from having everything the way you like it. It comes no matter what you are going through, as a gift from the God of glory, who, in relationship with you, is able to give you peace and contentment in your heart in the midst of the pressures, the problems and the dangers of life.

Surely this is what the apostle Paul meant in Philippians: "I have learned the secret both how to be abased and to abound," {cf, Phil 4:12}. What secret? He tells us: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {Phil 4:12 RSV}. It is that inner strengthening, by a relationship with the Living God, which is the secret of contentment, whether you are abased or whether you abound; the realization that a loving Father is working out strange and inscrutable purposes, which you cannot always guess at or estimate, through the difficult problems and circumstances which you are undergoing.

Some of you may be going through such times. Some of you young men may be facing the matter of draft registration and are afraid of what will happen; it is not convenient, it interrupts the affairs of life. But there are a lot of things like that: accidents can do that; disease can do that. Life must be taken the way it is. The glory of the Scriptures is that they do not try to evade life, to put over it a veil, to doll it up or dress it up to make it look different. Scripture faces life just the way it is, but tells us that God has provided an answer, and that answer is found by those who know how to walk before him, to love him, to fear him, to trust him and to rest their lives in his hands. This does not excuse us from the struggles of life, or from the need to make decisions, but it does reassure us that those who walk that way will find a source of contentment and satisfaction that is the gift of the God of grace.

### **Prayer:**

Thank you, Father, for your faithful dealings with us. How like children we are, so little understanding life, so often confused, so many times bewildered by what we face, sometimes resentful, sometimes angry because it is not all working out the way we thought. Forgive us, and help us to trust, to know, to learn and to realize afresh that your word is always true, that you will indeed be to us what you promised to be, as we trust and obey. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Can we Trust Government?

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Things that Don't Work: Ecclesiastes

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 8:2-15

Message No: 7

## AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

The section of the book of Ecclesiastes to which we come this morning deals with the mysteries, the strange enigmas, that confront us in many of the situations we go through in life, the situations which make us ask the ever-recurring question, "Why? Why should this happen to me?"

Some of you who have been young as long as I have remember Victor Herbert's song, written many years ago, *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*. His solution to the question of the mystery of life was love: "For it is love alone for which the world is seeking; and it is love alone which can repay." But our Searcher, King Solomon, in his quest to understand the riddles of life, does not agree with that. He found that the secret of life is significance, meaningfulness, a sense of contentment about one's life. That is where the answers lie.

This section, beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 8, marks the last of the four major divisions of the book of Ecclesiastes. From here to the end of the book the author does not bring us anything new. He simply repeats and enlarges upon the claim which he has made all along, that the significance of life is found only in a daily contact with a Living God. In this section he would remind us that we are to take life as it comes and not try to understand everything about it. Here he gives us four good reasons for not trying to solve all the problems and answer all the questions that life throws at us.

The first reason is found in the close of Chapter 8, beginning with Verse 16:

**When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep; then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. {Eccl 8:16-17 RSV}**

The Searcher's claim is quite clear: life is too complicated, too vast, too filled with conflicting elements for any one of us to figure out all the answers. Even sleepless toil will not solve all life's mysteries. Though we stay up all night and day, trying to think through and understand the complicated events that bring to pass the circumstances of our lives, we will never fully understand.

The Bible attaches no stigma to trying to understand life. Rather, the pursuit of knowledge is everywhere encouraged in Scripture. We must never adopt the attitude of anti-intellectualism that characterizes some segments of Christianity today. The mind does matter. We are to reason and think about what God is doing and what life gives us. But we must always remember, as the argument makes clear here, that no matter how much we try to think about life, mysteries will still remain. We do not have enough data, nor do we have enough ability to see life in its totality to answer all the questions. We must be content with some degree of mystery.

Though these words were written by the wisest man of the ancient world, a man who had gained a reputation for wisdom throughout his entire reign as King of Israel, yet he admits that man cannot know all the answers. He even says that diligence in labor will not unravel life's mysteries: "However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out." We will still be left knitting our brows, scratching our heads, asking the eternal, "Why?"

Even when men claim to know the answers behind what happens to us, they are really only deceiving themselves. This is a tremendous statement. Many people are unwilling to accept the truth of Scripture until they can understand everything in it. But if you are waiting for that you will never make it. Although this book

was written almost 2,500 years ago, it is still true, even in our age of advanced knowledge, that no one can find all the answers.

Today, many hope that the computer will solve the mysteries of life. The great hope of humanity today seems to center around this remarkable invention, the computer, with its ability to do far more than a single human mind can comprehend. I am not denigrating the marvel of computer science; it has changed the whole course of our age. But even these great computers, with their ability to compress knowledge into micro-chips containing information which once could only have been printed, perhaps, in whole libraries, nevertheless are still not going to solve all the problems of life. Life is just too complicated.

When you think about your own life, about how many of the things that have happened to you have been determined by events over which you had no control, and which had to fall together in a certain pattern before they could ever have come to pass, events you could not have anticipated, you can see how true these words are. No one can find out all the answers. Luis Palau has often remarked about the many events that had to come together for he and I ever to have met, almost a quarter of a century ago, in a city in northern Argentina. We met in a rather simple way, yet that event changed both of our lives. That meeting eventually launched him into a worldwide evangelistic ministry, and thousands upon thousands have come to Christ as a result of it. How could that happen? As far as Luis was concerned, it all hung upon a simple decision to go or not to go to a meeting one evening. How can we understand that strange merging of simplicity and complexity? The *Quoheleth* argues that life is too complicated for us ever to answer all the questions and understand all the mysteries. We must learn to cry with the Apostle Paul, "O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" {Rom 11:31 RSV}

The *Quoheleth* has a second argument, in Chapter 9, Verse 1, which reflects that very word which we have just quoted from Paul:

**But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate man does not know. {Ecc 9:1a RSV}**

"I have been meditating on this, observing, seeking and thinking about it," he says. "I have come to the conclusion that even though we may understand that we are in the hand of God, nevertheless it is difficult to know from the events that happen to us whether we have his approval or his disapproval."

This has been stated several times already in this book. We saw that prosperity is not always a sign that God is particularly happy about you; even the wicked prosper sometimes. Adversity, on the other hand, is not always a sign that you are being punished by God. The book of Job is proof of that. Job's three tormentors, whom he called his "friends," were convinced that what was happening to him was a sign that God was angry at him and was punishing him for sin. But by the end of the book it is clear they are totally wrong in that judgment. All suffering, all personal problems, do not always come -- although sometimes they do -- as a result of God's disapproval of things in our lives.

So again, we must learn to live with mystery. We are not smart enough, we do not see enough, we do not understand enough. None of our vaunted technological equipment will answer all the questions. Eventually we must agree with God's words, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways," (Isa 55:8). That is one of the most difficult lessons to learn in life. We think that because God tells us certain things about himself we can figure out what he is going to do. We must resist that; we cannot. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," (Isa 55:9). God will never be false to his character; he will never contradict what he said. We are just not smart enough to always figure it out or anticipate it.

Beginning at this latter part of Verse 1 and running through Verse 6 is a section in which the Searcher confronts death as the ultimate mystery of life. This is a rather gloomy section. In reading through this book many of you, perhaps, have noted that the author seems to be preoccupied with the thought of death. We are not used to that today. We live in a time when people are very busily trying to forget about death. We have devised all kinds of means by which we can, temporarily at least, maintain the illusion that life is going to go

on forever. But the Scriptures are very honest and realistic about life, consequently they frequently face the fact of death. We see that in this passage:

**Everything before them [us] is vanity [emptiness] since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate [one event] comes to all; also the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. {Eccl 9:1b-3 RSV}**

His statement, basically, is that death is the great equalizer. No matter whether we are righteous or unrighteous, good, bad or indifferent, death is going to come to all. Death is the great proof that there is something wrong about humanity; it forces us to face reality.

As a pastor, I have noticed that some people, non-Christians, especially, are very uncomfortable at funerals. They are nervous and edgy; they want to get it over quickly and get back to their local bar, their comfortable living room, or whatever. In observing that phenomenon, I have asked myself what is it about funerals that makes them so nervous? The answer I came to is that a funeral is one event where one can no longer escape ultimate reality. A funeral is proof that we are not in control of our own lives. Very few of us would choose to die if we had any way of preventing it, yet there is going to be an end to our existence. This is what makes people uncomfortable and anxious to get back to the comfortable illusions of life.

The fact that death comes to both good and bad, therefore, according to the argument here, forces us to face the evil within us. Notice where this Searcher comes out: "Also the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live" (Verse 3b). That is the reason for death. According to the Scriptures, death comes because of sin: "Sin came into the world ... and death through sin," (Rom 5:12). Death spread throughout humanity because there is evil in us.

Our own personal death is the hard, harsh, square peg that refuses to fit into all the round holes we plan for our future; it is the sand in our oyster that irritates us and makes our spirits protest against it. Why should we learn all these great lessons of life and, just when we have learned them we must give them all up and there is no opportunity to exercise them? Something about that makes us protest.

If we have been brought up to believe the universal lie of our day -- which is being flung at us all the time through the media -- that we deserve to live, then this constantly approaching termination of our life reminds us that that is not so. In the eyes of the God of the universe we do not deserve to live. If we are allowed life beyond death it is a gift of God's grace, not something we have earned ourselves. Something in us deserves to die; that is what universal death declares.

That fact is what makes everybody essentially religious. This is why man cannot live like an animal. Even those who claim atheism, and attempt to act and live as though there were no God, give evidence from time to time that they do not really believe that. Beyond death is something someone -- they do not know who or what -- waiting for them, so they cannot be comfortable with the idea of atheism. They have to find some answer to the problems of life, and death is what forces them to do that.

I ran across an article the other day by Brooks Alexander, of the Spiritual Counterfeits group in Berkeley, which had a marvelous statement about this very theme of death. Let me share it with you:

Just as death is, humanly speaking, a final and total separation, so the awareness of that end shatters our attempt to find some sense or value in the pattern of life here and now.

When people try to live only for this life, when all their values are centered here and they see nothing beyond this, they are never able to solve any of the riddles or questions of life. The thing that constantly intrudes upon them is the fact of death; they cannot find any final philosophy that comforts and satisfies them when they think of death.



Brooks Alexander continues:

As that final entropy creeps backward into our every experience, it brings with it a conviction of brokenness, anxiety and alienation that penetrates to the heart of our being. All religion ultimately is an attempt to come to terms with the pervasive and insidious fragmentation of our lives that is introduced by the prospective certainty of death.

Somehow we sense this even though we will not talk about it. We have to try to find an answer, and that is what makes us religious. He goes on:

Humanity cannot therefore escape a religious response to its condition, because individual humans can never escape the fact that they must die. This religious response is specifically a groping for some ground of unity that will enable us to grasp an unknown harmony beyond the brittle disintegration of meaning that fractures all our hopes and pleasures.

Those insightful statements simply mean that we are restless and unhappy until we find an answer beyond ourselves that will give some unity to our life both now and in that which may follow. Therefore we become religious beings. This has been a rather gloomy passage, I admit, but it is one that we must face if we are going to be realistic about events.

Notice how *Quoheleth* , then, continues:

**But he who is joined with all the living has hope [that is, while there's life there's hope], for a living dog is better than a dead lion [there is no arguing with that]. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more for ever any share in all that is done under the sun. {Eccl 9:4-6 RSV}**

This, of course, does not mean there is no life after death. This is clearly written from the perspective of this life, "under the sun." From that perspective, when people die they cannot return; all the glamour, the joy, satisfaction, peace and happiness that this life can afford is forever ended once we leave it. There is no question about that, and that is all that this is stating. So if we are going to get anything out of life, if our present existence is to have any meaning at all, it must be found now; that is his argument. Do not waste your life, do not run after every titillating experience, every empty pleasure that life may fling at you, trying to lose yourself in a merry round of forgetfulness. Use life; that is his argument. Fill it to the full, discover its purpose now, for whatever meaning life may have it must be found right now.

So we are not to seek after comfort, but significance. What are you living for? That is his question. What are you dying for? What is the purpose of your existence? I would urge every one of us individually to come to an answer to that. Why are you here? What is it all about? If life has any purpose at all it must be found in what happens now. The attempt of this book is to bring us to the answer to that, to help us to see what that purpose is.

Once again the Searcher comes to the conclusion, which he has come to many times already in this book, but which he expresses most fully in Verses 7-10:

**Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do.**

**Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head.**

**Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. {Eccl 9:7-10 RSV}**

"Sheol" means "the grave." It does not, in this reference at least, mean "hell." It means "the grave," the end of life.

Verse 7 is a most remarkable verse, because, in it, there is a statement of what we call in the New Testament the "New Covenant," God's new provision for living. It is clear from the New Testament that God has given us a gift of approval, of righteousness. Because we already have that by faith, we are freed, no longer do we have to struggle vainly to try to please God; we live in a way that does please him because we have already been accepted and approved by him.

Notice how clearly that is stated here in Verse 7: "Go and eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do." This is a recognition, even in the Old Testament, of a relationship of righteousness that has already been established. It is true that basis was laid in our Lord's coming into this world at the Christmas season, and in his subsequent death and resurrection. Yet it is applied to all the people in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, who had faith in what God declared, who believed his word, and, thus were given the gift of righteousness just as we are. Here the *Quoheleth* faces that as the real basis for life. If you want to find significance in your life, if you want to find deep meaning, peace and contentment, this is the basis of it: Believe what God has given you already, and then, on that basis, live your life to the full. Fill it with all that is of value, reason and worth.

**Let your garments be always white; {Eccl 9:8 RSV}**

White garments are a symbol in Scripture of practical righteousness, of good deeds being done which flow out of this new relationship that is already true. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Oil is always the symbol of the Holy Spirit at work. So here is a life filled with the Spirit, full of good works, flowing out of the realization that we are already accepted by God. That is the new basis for living. That is what Paul is talking about in Romans: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law [with its demand that you measure up before God will accept you], but under grace [with its marvelous provision of righteousness as a gift]," {cf, Rom 6:14}. It is yours for the taking, though you do not deserve it, and by it you are rendered fully accepted and loved by God.

So the right living follows that, and thus he encourages us here to live a normal life. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your life. God likes that. He ordained marriage for that very reason, and it is right to enjoy the fullness of marriage, its companionship, its conjugal joys. And then, enjoy your God-given work. Work is not a curse, it is not something we are forced to do in order to keep alive. Work is a blessing. In these days of increasing unemployment many are rediscovering the fact that it is a pleasant thing to have work to do. Do it with all your might; that is the way to enjoy it. Throw yourself into it, do not just get through it the best you can so you can get home and start enjoying yourself. The modern proverb says, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is ready for the weekend!" Many of us live, or seek to live, that way, but that is not the biblical way. The biblical approach is that work is given to you as a gift of God, so enjoy it; do it with all your might, because it is God's gift to you.

Do we live like this?

We who are Christians, we who know the reality of the gift of righteousness and have discovered the secret of contentment, of being able to handle even difficult conditions because of the joy that God imparts to us by his presence within, have we begun to live this way?

I have to ask myself that. Is there an aura of peace about all that I do? When people look into my eyes do they see a heart at rest, at peace? When they look into yours, do they see that? Watch the eyes of people who are filling the stores in this busy commercial time and you will so often see emptiness, loneliness, misery and heartache reflected. But Christians are called to be a manifestation of a different way of life, of a secret that others do not know. There is to be calmness, a peace, a consciousness about us that no matter what happens it is never going to be too bad or too difficult because we have with us a God who will enable us to handle it. Do we view life that way?

What is your view of your approaching death?

Do you have some sense of anticipation about it, with the awareness that beyond death is the final explanation of all the unanswered, unexplained questions of life? I became a Christian when I was 11 years old. Like all young boys, I faced life then with mixed feelings of both anticipation and dread. But one thing I have always wanted to do was to grow old. God has answered that prayer. Now, as I near the end, I can say that looking ahead is a time filled with happy anticipation that God is going to answer all the questions which I have had to leave unanswered, because the full meaning of this present experience will never be brought out until death intervenes. Then will come all the answers, abundantly, satisfyingly, fully.

That is the Christian perspective of life. If we succumb to the empty view of the worldlings around us we too will find ourselves all ajitter, frustrated, feeling bitter, angry and upset with our circumstances. But these words call us to the realization that the meaning of life can never be found by trying to solve all the problems. Rather, it is by trust in the Living God, who knows what he is doing and is working out his strange purposes through our existence, teaching us all we need to know as we go on through, so that our eyes should reflect the peace of God and our hearts respond with joy at the promises that await fulfillment yet to come.

**Prayer:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God our Father, filling all the empty places of our lives, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, answering all the unanswered questions, be our experience not only this day but through all these days that lie ahead. In the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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## **THE ONLY WAY TO GO**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

We have all seen the wall plaque which says, in a strong German accent,

"We grow too soon oldt,  
und too late schmart."

Many people agree with the conclusion that in life age increases faster than wisdom does. By the time you learn what you need to know it is already too late to use it!

But in the book of Ecclesiastes we learn that although that is a common experience in life, it is not a necessary one. It is possible to learn before it is too late the wisdom which will guide you through life. Wisdom, however, will not help you avoid all the hurt and pain of life. Many people make the mistake of thinking that wisdom will deliver them from all pressure and struggle, but it will not. We learn in this book that struggle, pain, pressure and sorrow all are part of the learning process. But by discovering and obeying the wisdom of God your life will not be rendered bitter, angry and resentful by such pain. You will not find yourself plunged into a morass of self-pity and depression; you will not find your life ravaged and torn apart, all your dreams collapsed at your feet. The wisdom of God will lead you into fullness and liberty and inward peace in the midst of the pressures and dangers of life. That is the message of the book of Ecclesiastes, as it is the message of the whole Bible.

In the section we come to this morning, beginning in Chapter 9, Verse 11, the Searcher tells us that the first and probably most difficult lesson of all to learn is that natural gifts in themselves are not enough to handle life; natural abilities and diligent effort will not lead us into truly successful living.

**Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. {Ecc1 9:11-12 RSV}**

Many of us have had experiences that confirm this. All our carefully laid plans have fallen apart; all our dreams, that we had what it took to succeed in some particular area of life, crumbled, and we could not understand why. We had to learn, as this text says, that "the battle is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift." That is true even in athletics. In the early part of this century Jim Thorpe, the famous Indian athlete, won many gold medals at the Olympic Games. He stood before the King of Sweden and was publicly acknowledged as the greatest athlete of his time. Yet all those medals and honors had to be given back when it was learned that as a boy he had played professional baseball for five dollars a season, which rendered him no longer an amateur.

It is not always the strong, the mighty, the able and the gifted who win in politics. We have recently seen men whom everybody thought a cinch to win public office, defeated, unable to fulfill their dreams. "The battle is not always to the strong," though many have sought the awards and the prizes of men. The Nobel Prize was given to a little woman in India, Mother Teresa, who ministered fully to the needs of the poor around her. Though Hollywood does its best to impress the American public, the picture that won first prize as the best picture of 1982 was *Chariots of Fire*, the story of a Christian athlete. The *Qoheleth* clearly tells us that natural gifts are never enough.

Other factors really make the difference. "Time and chance happen to them all." What does he mean by that? We often say, "You have to be the right man, at the right place, at the right time." In other words, there are elements of rightness that have to fall together before the abilities that someone may have can accomplish his desire. What the Searcher is saying, of course, is that life is not in our control. The illusion which the secular media presses upon us all the time is that we can handle our life by our choices. "It's your life! You can live it the way you please." So the television commercials proclaim. But *Qoheleth* says it cannot be done that way. "Time and chance happen to them all." Just when you think you have something under control it can all fall apart. Disasters come when we least expect them: "Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare." Everything can fall apart. Every one of us has had some experience of that.

But, his point is, there is a wisdom which can handle that. Even though disaster may strike, it can be turned into victory. He has an example to give us, in Verses 13-16:

**I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded. {Ecc1 9:13-16 RSV}**

There is no record of this event elsewhere in Scripture. Perhaps Solomon, the greatest king of his day, heard of this from a delegation from some other country. It may be that he was slightly confused about an incident, recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 20, that did happen, probably when he was a boy. King David sent his general, Joab, to capture a traitor named Sheba, who had taken refuge in a small city in northern Israel. Joab set his army around the city, built siege works against it, and was ready to knock down the walls and capture the city when a wise woman called out to him from the walls and suggested that the leaders of the city throw the traitor's head out to Joab. They did so, and thus saved the city. Perhaps that is what Solomon is referring to here.

But God's wisdom can turn what looks like sure defeat into victory, although his wisdom may not even be

remembered; it may even be popularly rejected. That is what Verse 16 implies: "I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded." But popular rejection is no sign that it is wrong or ineffective. We have to remember today that the world will never applaud the basic truth of the Christian faith because Christianity judges the world, points out its error and exposes its illusions; it humbles it. The world cannot take that. So we can expect that the wisdom which we are learning from God will not necessarily be popular. Nevertheless it is that which can deliver, that which can free.

I want to share with you a paragraph from a full-page ad describing their work which the *Jews For Jesus* group ran in various metropolitan newspapers recently:

God promised a Messiah, a deliverer, a problem solver. And if there is anything more difficult than the fact of sin, it's the idea that God solves our problems. But He can! He can make us want peace, give us hearts to care about one another, relieve guilt, mend broken homes, give meaning to our lives and diminish the din of the Twentieth Century with the music of His love.

That eloquently expressed the message of the Searcher.

What is this wisdom we are talking about? All through this book we have been looking at wisdom versus foolishness, and in the section we have this morning there is a great contrast drawn between them. What does the Bible mean when it uses those terms? It ought to be clear to us by now that wisdom is to act upon the revelation of reality which the Scriptures give us; wisdom refers to actions that are controlled by the revelation of God. In Romans 12:2 Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world [do not run after all the attractive, illusive dreams shouted at you constantly by the world] but be transformed by the renewal of your mind," {Rom 12:2a RSV}. Think Christianly about life! Look at what you are going through, not from the standpoint of what seems right -- the Scriptures warn about that -- but upon what is right according to the word of God. Here is true wisdom: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths." {cf, Prov 3:5-6 KJV}. The opposite, of course, is foolishness, the adopting of the secular mind, the spirit of the age, of running after the advice of those who are devoid of insight from the Word of God.

There follows in this next section a tremendous contrast between wisdom and foolishness, which I would like to illustrate on a very pragmatic level that concerns us all this morning. Last week as we talked together about some of the counseling matters that we were going through, our elders and pastors learned that there are at least twenty-three couples here at Peninsula Bible Church who are contemplating or are actually involved in divorce. I do not know their names, we did not talk about names, but about facts. Some of the couples involved are probably here this morning. I do not know who you are, so I am not talking to any person or aiming this at anyone. But I want to express the deep concern of the elders and pastors about this situation because it represents a running after the spirit of the age, the wisdom of the world, rather than a following through of the wisdom of God.

We need to understand clearly what *Qoheleth* himself has warned us about earlier in this book. In Chapter 5 he said, "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it." Married couples have taken sacred vows before God and witnesses, that they would stay together for better or for worse until death shall part them. That is the wisdom of God. That is what preserves a society. If anything is going to arrest the fragmentation of life around us, the breakdown of morals and all the other terrible things that are happening in our day, it has got to come from Christians who will stand against the spirit of the age, who will refuse to go along with what is being suggested on every side.

Verse 6 of Chapter 5 continues, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger [the representative of God] that it was a mistake [that is what many are saying today, 'I made a mistake']; why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?" That is not painting God as a killjoy, as a heartless avenger who visits judgment upon people. It rather recalls that God has set the rules of life, and he does not change them. To forgive us does not mean he relinquishes the penalty for our misdeeds; it means that he goes through it with us, he strengthens us in the midst of it, but the agony and the hurt is all there.

I want to express the deep sense of sympathy that I personally have, as do all the elders and pastors, with couples who are struggling with their marriages. This is not at all uncommon. Almost all married couples go through pain, hurt and struggle. I remember how hopeless things looked at times in the early years of my own marriage, how difficult it was to relate to one another, how easy it would have seemed to walk away, forget the whole thing and start over. But that is why there are marriage vows -- in order to help us face up to a situation that will result in tremendous learning processes about ourselves.

The problem with every threatened marriage is the people involved in the marriage -- both of them! They need to know something about themselves; that is what we have been seeing from the Scriptures. We do not know that we are mysteries to ourselves. Conflict in marriage is a way of helping us discover what we are contributing to every situation. To flee marriage is to flee into another set of problems, hurts and pains that are usually worse than the ones you are trying to run from. Many people testify that the divorce which they thought was so simple a solution to a mistake they thought they had made, only introduced them into a more painful and hurtful situation, one that continued in many ways for the rest of their lives.

My counsel to those who are struggling in this regard is to call off the legal dogs and seek counsel and help from those who are ready and available to help you through difficult times. Look to the Lord, look to your God for help in solving the problems of life. That is what Jesus came for, "to give us hearts to care about one another, to relieve our guilt, to mend our broken homes."

With that situation in mind, let us look at the passage that follows, Verse 17:

**The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.  
{Ecc 10:17 RSV}**

That is simply saying that the insights of Scripture, heard in the inner self, quietly, before God alone, are more effective to solve problems than worldly rhetoric or propaganda, better than the ideas of some prominent opinion maker who says things that are popularly received but are contrary to Scripture. In Scripture, rulers are not always governors and kings; they are opinion-makers, shapers of the minds of men. Yet what they say is often merely what foolish people around them want to hear. The words of wisdom heard in quiet are much more effective than such empty propaganda. He goes on,

**Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.**

**Dead flies make a perfumer's ointment give off an evil odor;  
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. {Ecc 9:18-10:1 RSV}**

This is true of actual battles that nations have fought at times. Oftentimes quiet, biblical principles have overcome the power of force. Look at the Civil Rights movement under Dr. Martin Luther King who, though he may have had a somewhat incomplete knowledge of Scripture, yet was basing his actions and leadership upon Scriptural principles of non-violent protest. There is a vivid example of how powerful such a movement can be to overcome injustice and outright physical abuse and set things right. This is true in an individual's, or in a couples' life, as well. Wisdom is better than war, better than fighting.

But a warning is included here: "... one sinner is like a dead fly in the perfumer's ointment which can give off a very bad odor." One person, insisting on following the world's philosophy, can often harm, arrest, or even destroy the healing work of wisdom.

The *Qoheleth* says,

**A wise man's heart inclines him toward the right,  
but a fool's heart toward the left [that ought to be the motto of the Republican Party! I don't  
understand why it isn't].  
Even when the fool walks on the road he lacks sense,  
and he says to everyone that he is a fool. {Ecc 10:2-3 RSV}**

God's wisdom provides a safer guide through life than the impulsive actions of those who are following the

popular views around. Even when a fool does take the right course he makes it clear that he does not understand why; he reveals his ignorance even when he talks. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer used to tell us at Dallas Seminary, "It is much better to keep silent and let everybody think you are a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!" *Qoheleth* is saying that even when fools take the right course and do the right thing, the way they explain or describe it reveals how wrong they are. It is like the man who jumped into the water to save another man who was drowning. Asked why he did so, he said, "I had to; he had my watch on!" So even when a fool walks on the road he lacks sense, and says to everyone that he is a fool.

Then the fourth contrast: wisdom is better than running away:

**If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place,  
for deference will make amends for great offenses. {Eccl 10:4 RSV}**

There are occasions when running away, getting out of it, looks like the best thing to do, but this text warns us that it is not. It is much wiser to give a soft answer that turns away wrath, or to show deference -- which means to acknowledge another person's feelings and rights instead of your own -- to the individual involved who may be offended. Even a ruler, even a king, can be placated by deference.

Then in Verses 5-7 we have the opposite of this, the hurt that foolish thinking can cause:

**There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on foot like slaves. {Eccl 10:5-7 RSV}**

An error that people in authority often make is that they appoint their incompetent friends to office; they put the wrong people in the right place. People who have no ability are exalted and put in high places, while those with great ability are treated like slaves and have no opportunity. Favoritism, this is called. In the last issue of *Time* magazine there was an article on how political appointments have diminished the authority and prestige of the Supreme Court of California. This is the very thing this verse is talking about.

Then in the next section, Verses 8-11, the Searcher returns to wisdom to describe the kinds of insights that wisdom will embrace. First, there is a section on avoiding dangers, understanding that certain situations have inherent dangers:

**He who digs a pit will fall into it,  
and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.  
He who quarries stones is hurt by them,  
and he who splits logs is endangered by them. {Eccl 10:8-9 RSV}**

Very few of us are ever going to be involved extensively in digging pits, breaking down walls, quarrying stones, splitting logs. But he is not only talking about actual physical situations; these are also descriptive, symbolic of the things we do to each other. Did you ever dig a pit for somebody, lay a trap to embarrass him, to make him look bad, or injure him in some way, only to find that you yourself were trapped by the situation you had designed? Wisdom understands that when you dig a pit you too are in danger; you may fall into it yourself.

Wisdom understands that when you try to break down some wall of obstruction that keeps you from getting at someone or something, you are in danger, for hidden in that wall is a serpent that will bite you. Many a person has discovered that in heavy-handedly trying to break down somebody's resistance he has triggered a serpent within himself that flashes up in anger and leads to hurtful, dangerous things. He himself has been bitten.

"He who quarries stones," who attempts to remove something of value, to dig out something for himself that will be of great use and profit to him, has to remember that he can be hurt by that. He may get what he wants, but it will be the worst thing that could happen to him. Psalm 106 says of the Israelites in the wilderness, "He gave them their request, but he sent leanness into their soul," {Psa 106:15 KJV}. "He who splits logs is endangered by them." Here is the same principle. The idea is that care must be exercised in all these attempts to do things that may endanger you as well.

Then there are two verses on how wisdom enlists help in time:

**If the iron is blunt and one does not whet the edge,  
he must put forth more strength,  
but wisdom helps one to succeed. {Eccl 10:10 RSV}**

If you do not think through what you are going to do and sharpen the edge of your approaches, thinking carefully through how you are going to go about something, you will only expend a lot of effort and find yourself worn out in the process. But the wise man, understanding the need for sharpness and clarity, will whet the edge of his thought before he attempts something, and thus succeed.

**If the serpent bites before it is charmed,  
there is no advantage in a charmer. {Eccl 10:11 RSV}**

The damage is already done. So do not go seeking counsel or help to remedy a situation after it has happened. Go for help before it is needed. Seek the counsel of one who can defuse the situation, one who can calm the serpent which is within all of us, before you get into trouble. That is the point of wisdom. How practical this is!

We will close this morning with the section from Verses 12-15, where *Qoheleth* sets forth the dangers of foolish talking:

**The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,  
but the lips of a fool consume him. {Eccl 10:12 RSV}**

When without thinking we follow the secular wisdom around us (wisdom that looks good and feels right but nevertheless is foolishness), we will end up hurting ourselves. How tragically this has been illustrated in the lives of those who fling overboard the wisdom of the Word and act according to the mind of the world. They end up broken, hurting, wretched, miserable, defiled, debauched, empty and lonely. All the increasing misery and anguish of life that we see around us is due to a deliberate turning away from the wisdom of the mind of God. It consumes, it destroys one.

Furthermore, it escalates:

**The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness,  
and the end of his talk is wicked madness. {Eccl 10:13 RSV}**

Read the papers tomorrow morning and you will see illustrations of people who started out trying to express themselves in a simple way, but the situation escalated until they resorted to violence, even murder. This is the power of foolishness.

Verse 14:

**A fool multiplies words,  
though no man knows what is to be,  
and who can tell him what will be after him? {Eccl 10:14 RSV}**

One of the marks of foolish wisdom is the effusiveness of it, of saying things for the sake of being heard. I am reminded of the man who said, "All my wife ever does is talk, talk, talk!" His friend asked, "What does she talk about?" He replied, "I don't know; she don't say!" Words that are devoid of content -- this is characteristic of our time. There never was such a day in which people were so bombarded with many words, much literature, much pouring out of words through the media. Yet so much of it is thoroughly empty, unsatisfying and misleading in the extreme.

So the Searcher closes the section,



**The toil of a fool wears him  
so that he does not know the way to the city. {Eccl 10:15 RSV}**

Isn't that revealing? The fool doesn't know The Way to San Jose; he doesn't know how to go; he is confused, weary, empty. So much of what we are hearing today leaves you like that. You run after these things and find they do not fulfill you, you do not feel strengthened. You spend hours looking at television, reading magazines, novels, or whatever, yet you are not fed, you are not satisfied, strengthened, or helped; you feel empty, lonely, and depressed.

Worse than that, you are confused. Many are saying, "I don't know what to do about this problem; I don't know what steps to take." But the Scriptures tell you that in every situation where you are looking for guidance there is a step to take, something you can do that is right. If you do the right, another step will open, then another, and soon you will find there is a Divine Hand guiding you step by step through the very situation. Instead of breaking up, ruining and damaging all that God has been doing, gradually the situation unfolds and leads to life; there comes a sense of joy and satisfaction that God has worked out the problem.

I have deliberately set this passage in the context of applying it to marriage, although it applies to many other situations. I want you who are struggling with your marriages to know that the congregation understands, we sympathize, we know it is difficult. But you are making a sad and sorry mistake if you resort to divorce. That is the world's way out.

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## **HOW, THEN, SHOULD WE LIVE ?**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

We are nearing the end of our studies in this wonderful Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The ancient Searcher of Israel is looking over all the philosophies of men and pointing out the things that will not work in life. This morning we are in the tenth chapter, beginning with verse sixteen.

Notice that the title I have given to this study is the question, "How, Then, Should We Live?" Some of you will immediately recognize that this is a slight alteration of the title of a book by Dr. Francis Schaeffer. His way of putting the question is, "How Should We Then Live?" I have always been uncomfortable by the place which the word "then" occupies in that title. It made me feel somewhat like the way I have felt when I have been a guest in someone's home and noticed a picture askew on the wall. As soon as my host left the room I jumped up, straightened the picture, and heaved a sigh of relief. So please forgive my impertinence in correcting the question to, "How, Then, Should We Live?"

That is a good question to ask at this point in the study of Ecclesiastes, and also a good question to ask at the Christmas season. In view of the new insights into life which we have found in this book; in view of the provision that God himself has made to supply to us directly the gift of enjoyment, "How, Then, Should We Live?" That is the question which the Searcher takes up as he draws near the close of this book.

In the passage which we will look at this morning, the answer is threefold. He tells us, first, that we ought to live supportively, that is, to be responsible to work with others, especially with regard to government. Then, secondly, he tells us to live generously, responsive to the needs of those around us. And, thirdly, to live thoughtfully -- responding daily to the truth that is taught in this book, and in all of Scripture. So live

supportively, live generously, live thoughtfully! I give you that at the beginning in case you wake up halfway through and wonder where we are!

Let us take the first one, live supportively, beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 10. This has to do with government. It is only natural that King Solomon would be much concerned about government. He was the head of state in his day. We have noted in these studies that the relationship of a believer, of a wise man, to the Word of God includes much to do with government. It is clear that government is part of God's plan for life.

King Solomon admits in this section that all government is not good:

**Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,  
and your princes feast in the morning!  
Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of free men,  
and your princes feast at the proper time,  
for strength, and not for drunkenness! {Eccl 10:16-17 RSV}**

Some governments (some "administrations" is the word we would use), are hard to live with. They are headed by persons who are either incompetent, impulsive, simpleminded, or naive, vain, insecure, or even untrustworthy and weak in their personal lives. Now that we are aware of the implications and full revelation of Watergate, we can see how much of the turmoil and trouble that we went through in those days stemmed from the insecurity, from the untrustworthy character, really, of the man who was President at that time. This past week Mr. Jaworski, the investigator of Watergate, died, and the news media reported on his career. I was struck by one thing that he said. As he was investigating the intrigue of Watergate, the thing that struck him most forcefully was hearing on a tape President Nixon's instructions to one of his underlings on how to lie so as not to perjure himself. That struck Mr. Jaworski as the most serious and solemn revelation of the weakness of the head of state at that time. That is what these words of Scripture represent as well. Some governments are weak; they do not have the kind of leadership we would like to see.

With such leadership oftentimes there is a hierarchy of officials who are given over to self-indulgence and self-serving. This is reflected in the phrase, "your princes feast in the morning." In the Hebrew culture the morning was to be given over to the judging of the needs and problems of the people; late afternoon and evening was the time for feasting. But here were men who indulged themselves all through the day, neglecting their duties to do so. Some administrations are like that, even in a democratic nation such as ours.

But we can also get good government. *Qoheleth* tells us, "Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of free men." Literally, the phrase, "son of free men," ought, perhaps, to be translated, "Your king is a free man." That is, he is free to be what he ought to be. He has control of himself; he is not a slave to his moods or his impulses. His subordinates also reflect that. They are responsible people who take care of their duties and feast at the proper time, and then only to gain strength, not merely to get drunk.

The point of all this is in the next two verses, which tell those who are seeking to be wise with the wisdom of God how to react to government whether it is good or bad. What should we do? Here are a couple of proverbs to guide us:

**Through sloth the roof sinks in,  
and through indolence the house leaks. {Eccl 10:18 RSV}**

Does your house leak? If it does, you now know the reason for it! I had a leak in my roof for two and a half years before someone finally fixed it, so I have to acknowledge that the verse is true. Here the Searcher compares the nation to a house. In the context, the application here is that a people who are given over to industriousness, hard work and profitable though demanding labor, are laying the foundation for steadiness in a government, no matter what the leader is like. Without that foundation of hard work and readiness to work the roof falls in; the house leaks. Then a nation is insecure, and subject to invasion.

The second proverb continues the same thought:

**Bread is made for laughter,  
and wine gladdens life,  
and money answers everything. (Eccl 10:19 RSV)**

That sounds up to date, doesn't it? But he is saying, of course, that even the legitimate, normal, proper joys of life -- bread which enables us to feast together and wine which gladdens life -- is all made available by money: "Money answers everything." The idea is that money supplies everything that is needed; and that money comes from hard and profitable work.

The way to enjoy the normal pleasures of life as well as the way a nation keeps strong and healthy is for its people to be given over to a willingness to work, not to have money and things handed out to them always. There is running all through the Scripture this recognition of the value of labor. This touches on the question of the welfare state, and on the increasingly luxurious living standards of our day. It declares that what makes a nation healthy, despite the weakness of its leaders, is industrious, hardworking citizens who are willing to pay their own way and put in full time at their employment. That is the way to support the government.

He closes this section with a warning on complaining about the government. Verse 20:

**Even in your thought, do not curse the king,  
nor in your bedchamber curse the rich;  
for a bird of the air will carry your voice,  
or some winged creature tell the matter. {Eccl 10:20 RSV}**

There, I am sure, is the origin of the popular saying, "A little bird told me." This may also be the first recorded instance of the bugging of a home by the government! It clearly reflects the modern proverb, "Even the walls have ears."

Do not complain about the government even in your bedchamber or in your innermost thoughts. This is not implying that if you do your complaining might get back to the king and he will be angry with you and punish you. Rather, it is the idea that your constant complaining about problems in government creates a condition that spreads dissatisfaction with, and distrust of, government. We may be seeing something of that today. We are living with a generation that, by and large, distrusts the powers and rights of government. This may be because young people who are now entering into their majority have heard us older ones grumbling so much about the government that they have learned to distrust it, to feel that it is an unnecessary evil, and to react violently against it.

I read an article the other day which predicted that from here on no American President will be able to serve more than one term in office. The reason given was because the media so focuses upon the President and criticizes so vehemently everything he does and every word he speaks that no President will be able to stand the glare of such adverse publicity; it will be impossible to elect him to office a second term because nobody will trust him. This is a commentary in our time against too much examination of peoples' lives, especially too much criticism of what they do. I was interested to hear one of our staff members at one of our seminars last week say that the American way is to elect a man to office, give him six months to change everything, and if he does not do it, spend the next three and a half years complaining about it. That may be close to the truth. There is a destructive element in complaining and griping all the time about what government does.

I was encouraged last week that several of our staff wrote letters to Mayor Dianne Feinstein in San Francisco to commend her for her vetoing of an ordinance designed to give equality to live-in lovers as though they were married couples. That would be very destructive to the social fabric. Against much of the popular opinion of the hour, Mayor Feinstein found the courage to veto that measure. I was blessed and encouraged by the fact that several of our staff wrote and supported her in that. What a difference it makes in the quality of government if we show our support for those who are in office. The appeal of the *Qoheleth* is that if you want to be wise, and in view of all that God provides in life as revealed in this book, then live supportively of the government.

His second word of admonition is found in Chapter 11, Verses 1-6. Here his word is, live generously:

**Cast your bread upon the waters,  
for you will find it after many days.  
Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,  
for you know not what evil may happen on earth. {Eccl 11:1-2 RSV}**

The idea expressed there is one of openhanded generosity. Give freely, wisely, but generously to the needs of those about. This phrase, "Cast your bread upon the waters," was a proverb in Israel for what looked like wasteful expenditure. No one would take good bread and throw it in the river; he would be regarded as a wastrel for doing that. But here we are enjoined to do that very thing. This is not encouraging us to be spendthrifts, to thoughtlessly and carelessly give away our money, spending it like a drunken sailor. What is meant is, be willing to take a chance where a real need is evident.

This is an appropriate section for this time of the year. When you see people in need, though you do not know how they are going to use your money -- it may not be apparent that they will even use it wisely -- nevertheless, be generous; that is what he is saying. "Cast your bread on the waters," for in the wisdom and purpose of God it may very well return to you some day when you are in need of help. I could relate several stories of people who helped strangers, although they had no idea that their help was even going to be used properly; then at some later time when they found themselves in serious trouble, that person or that deed reappeared in such a way as to help them in their time of need. This is what the *Qoheleth* is encouraging us to do.

Also, give as widely as possible: "Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what evil may happen on earth." That is not limiting us to how many we should have on our help list. This Hebrew idiom, "Give a portion to seven or even to eight," was a way of saying, "Give to as many as you can, and then some." Be generous. Do not stop with a few close needs around you; do not say, "I gave at the office," when somebody asks for help at your door. You do not know what evil may be averted by your gift; that is the implication of this verse.

Giving is a way of relieving need, but oftentimes the need is not fully expressed. Sometimes we have to be sensitive to where people are, and the fact that in their pride they hide dire needs. But if we are generous in our giving we often are meeting needs that we do not know anything about; if we spread it as wisely as we can we continue to meet widespread needs in that way.

There follows four reasons for this kind of generosity. These are particularly pertinent to us at this time of year. The Searcher again quotes some proverbs. (It is obvious that King Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs because he loves them so.) Here are two good reasons, in Verse 3:

**If the clouds are full of rain,  
they empty themselves on the earth; [nobody can contradict that here in California]  
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,  
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. {Eccl 11:3 RSV}**

We are not going to argue with that either, but what does it mean? We must take this in the light of the context around. The first reason is that we are to give generously because it is the natural outflow of a full life; like clouds that are filled with rain and empty themselves again and again and again upon the earth.

A week or so ago I was entranced in watching the weather reports about Hurricane Iwa, which hit the Hawaiian Islands and dumped billions of gallons of water. Then it moved across the Pacific and hit the West Coast, dumping billions of gallons of water upon us. It moved up into the Sierras, then into the Rockies and across into the Plain States and caused much of the flooding that is going on this very day in Missouri, Arkansas and the Mississippi Valley. Then it moved across the nation and dumped water again on the East Coast, passing out at last into the Atlantic. Like clouds that are full of rain, a life that is full of the blessing and grace of God ought to shower others with that blessing. Remember the words of Jesus, "Freely you have received, freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8}. God has blessed us abundantly in this country. Despite this present recession we are still the richest nation on earth, the poorest among us are better off than so-called rich people in many countries of the world. God has richly blessed us. We are to give because it is the natural outflow of a

life that is already filled with the blessings of God, not only physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

The second parable about the tree falling to the south or north is somewhat more difficult, but the other day I saw a motto in someone's kitchen that captures exactly what this idiom is saying: it was the slogan, "Bloom where you are planted." That is, it is God who controls the fall of the tree out in the forest; whether it falls to the south or the north is within the scope of divine providence to determine, but where it falls, that is where it is to be. This is Solomon's way of saying to us, "Where God has put you, in your present circumstances, that is where you are to give. Meet the needs around you. Supply the needs of those with whom you come in contact." That does not always mean geographically. You may be in touch with someone halfway around the world whose needs you are aware of, but God has brought that to your knowledge so that you can meet that need.

There is another reason given in Verse 4:

**He who observes the wind will not sow;  
and he who regards the clouds will not reap. {Ecc 11:4 RSV}**

That is, do not wait for the perfect time to give. Do not wait until you have a certain figure in the bank before you start giving. This is a good word to young people. You sometimes think that because you have a limited income you do not have to give, but if you wait until you get enough to live on before you start giving you will never give. Give as the need arises, as the opportunity comes, as far as you can; that is the exhortation here.

Finally, a fourth reason, a very insightful one, appears in Verses 5-6:

**As you do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.**

**In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether all our days; this is what both alike will be good. {Ecc 11:5-6 RSV}**

Notice that twice in those verses is the phrase, "you do not know." Again, this is referring to what we have seen many times in this letter about the mystery connected with life. There is a lot we do not know. One of the things no one has yet understood, even in this scientific world of ours, is, "how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child." How is the human personality, the uniqueness of our humanity, that which distinguishes us from the beast, passed on to the yet unborn fetus? No one knows, but it is present; the child is a human being. This is another verse that clearly supports the anti-abortion movement of today, because it clearly indicates that a fetus is a person.

These verses point up our lack of understanding of the power of God. We do not know how he produces life, we do not know how he uses gifts, but he does -- and he uses them in remarkable ways. Remember the story of Jesus observing the people throwing their money into the temple treasury. One woman threw in two pennies, two mites, the smallest coin in the Hebrew culture yet of her he said, "This woman has cast in more than all the others who have given," {cf, Luke 21:3}. Many have puzzled over those words. Two mites are hardly a drop in the bucket compared with the wealth that may have been put into that treasury that day.

What did Jesus mean? What he said was literally true. That story from the lips of Jesus has been repeated all over the earth, in every culture and clime. For two thousand years it has been told again and again. It has motivated more people to give than any other story ever told. Thus it is literally true that in the wisdom and power of God that tiny gift was so multiplied that it has outweighed all the giving of any single gift from any individual, no matter how rich, throughout the history of Christendom. That is the power of God to use our gifts. We do not know what he is going to do with the money and the help that we give. Nor do we understand the timing of God. You cannot say that a gift given at some particularly prosperous time of your life, larger in amount than you could give at any other time, is going to be used more greatly of God than any small gift that you may give. You cannot tell whether the fifty cents or dollar gift given when you were in high school or college may be used of God to produce great benefit in the lives of others, or that something given in old age

might not do the same thing. We do not know the power of God or the timing of God. But we are encouraged to give, because "God loves a cheerful giver," {2 Cor 9:7b RSV}. He changes and blesses lives, he changes the history of the world by the phenomenon of Christian giving. So, live generously, says *Qoheleth*.

How, then, should we live? Live supportively of the power of rights of government; live generously in meeting the needs of those around you. Then third, live thoughtfully. Verse 7:

**Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun.**

**For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. {Eccl 11:7-8 RSV}**

Light and sun are symbols of life lived in the love of God. Just as we love to step outside when we see the sun break through on a cloudy, gloomy day, so we can enjoy the love of God, the sense of his acceptance, the joy of his presence, the feeling that we are approved and accepted by him, the gift of righteousness by faith. This is what makes life beautiful, enjoyable, and is cause for rejoicing, this is what makes life worth living.

We have seen all through this book that enjoyment does not come from things. "The days of darkness will be many," *Qoheleth* tells us. It is difficult to tell whether this is referring to the interspersing of times of trial and problems in life, or whether (as I think it may) be referring to the ending of our earthly life. (That is what it goes on to ours, is, speak of in the next chapter.) Life is given to us for enjoyment, but the secret of it, as we have seen many times already, is not possessions (Jesus underscored that: "A man's life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesses" {cf, Luke 12:15}), but rather a relationship with a Living God. Let us rejoice because of that.

He goes on in the final two verses to spell this out in terms of specifics addressed especially to youth:

**Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, [the Hebrew expression includes women as well]**

**Rejoice, O young people, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.**

**Remove vexation from your mind, and put away evil from your flesh [literally, instead of "pains from your body," it is "evil from your flesh"]; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. {Eccl 11:9-10 RSV}**

This is not saying that God is offering life with one hand and taking it back with the other. It is really an encouragement to us to realize that God gave us the gift of youth, with its strength, its optimism, its cheer, its dreams, its hopes, its opportunities.

I am always amazed at the energy of young people. We have three little grandsons living with us now. When I come home, weary and tired, although they have been tearing around all day they still want to wrestle me on the floor of the living room. Sometimes I heave a sigh of relief when they finally give up and go to bed. Some of us who are older like to quote George Bernard Shaw, who said, "Youth is such a wonderful thing it is a shame to waste it on young people." The point of this is that God gives the gift of youth so rejoice in it, enjoy it, use it, the strength of it, the cheerfulness of it, the optimism of it. Young people, for the most part, always believe that everything is going to turn out all right, so they energetically pursue things. This verse encourages that.

Youth is the time to plan, to try new things, to explore new opportunities, new adventures. In my twenties I had the opportunity, following the outbreak of World War II, to go to the Hawaiian Islands and work in industry there. It seemed to me a great and enticing opportunity to see new places. I have always been grateful that I did that in my twenties, when I could enjoy it to the full. I believe that this is what this verse is telling us to do. Youth is the time to seize opportunities and to follow our desires.

But -- there is always a but, isn't there? Remember that ultimately there must be an accounting. This is a parallel to Paul's word in Second Corinthians, "We must all [all believers] appear before the judgment seat of Christ that we may receive the things done in the body, whether they be good or bad," {cf, 2 Cor 5:10}. This book will close with that reminder again. Look at the last verse:

**For God will bring every deed into judgment,  
with every secret thing, whether good or evil. {Eccl 12:14 RSV}**

That is not a threat. It is simply a guide, a reminder to youth that though there are great, open doors of opportunity set before you which you will not have later in life, nevertheless, enter them with the realization that you must make wise choices. You must deny yourself the pleasures of sin; you must make choices in the light of what will ultimately be the evaluation of your life.

He goes on, in Verse 10, to specify exactly what he means. Here is what a young person ought to do. First, "Remove vexation from your mind." Vexation is a word that combines the thoughts of anger and resentment. This is one of the great problems with youth. Young people tend to be angry and resentful when things do not go the way they like. God is warning them not to be trapped by that. That is what makes young people rebel; that is what makes them set their minds to plunge themselves into distressful, dangerous situations and hurtful experiences. So, "remove vexation from your mind." Do not let it gnaw away at your spirit and thus find yourself an angry young man, a resentful young woman, not liking what God has given you or where he has put you.

And second, "put away evil from your flesh." Stop bad and harmful practices. Put away dangerous things-drugs, wrongful use of your sexual powers, damaging things, smoking, drinking, whatever they are-stop them; that is what he says. That is living thoughtfully through life.

Remember too that "youth and the dawn of life are vanity." Even that glorious experience of youth is not the reason why life was given. Here again we see a challenge to the secular illusions that we are subjected to all the time. In the media we are told that youth is the great desideratum. Youth is what is held up for us to emulate. We are exposed to a thousand invitations to find the secret of recovering or preserving our youth: "Buy this new salve to smear on, perfume to spray on, or device to wear to preserve your youth." But youth, according to the wise words of Scripture, is in itself emptiness. It is not vitality that will satisfy, but a relationship with a Living God. Life finds its fulfillment, its meaning and its significance only as you develop a relationship with the Living God daily through your life. That is why *Qoheleth* goes on to say in the closing chapter, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," {Eccl 12:1a RSV}.

How, then, should we live? Live supportively with regard to the government; live generously with regard to the hurts and needs of those around you; and live thoughtfully as you daily make the choices and decisions of life.

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## **BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

I want to assure you that the title of this message, "Before It's Too Late," has nothing to do with last-minute Christmas shopping! If you are like me, you have seen to it that your wife has taken care of that already. The

title refers to the yearning hope of every one of us here this morning, young and old alike, that we might fulfill our dreams, that we might realize the possibilities of our lives and be wholly and truly what we were made to be. This is an especially appropriate theme to consider at Christmastime, when everyone is singing of that silent night, when joy broke through to an anguished world, when angels announced to the shepherds, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior," a Redeemer, a Recoverer, a way back from a life already gone astray.

That is what the Searcher of Israel is concerned with in the book of Ecclesiastes, that we might find our way out of the tragedies, the troubles, the difficulties and the infirmities of life before it is too late; that we would find the secret of living. So he begins this last chapter of the book with a word to youth:

**Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; {Eccl 12:1 RSV}**

It is clear that this is an appeal to young people to think carefully about their Creator, not merely to remember that he is there. The thought is: recall God's presence daily; live in a relationship with him; seek to discover the greatness and glories of God while you are still young, before it is too late. We will come back to that thought, but first I would like to read the verses that follow, because these define what the Searcher has already suggested is the reason for thinking about and relating to God while one is still young. That is, "evil days are coming."

Those evil days are described in Verses 2-8, in a vivid and beautiful imagery which describes the aging process, the approach and decrepitude of old age.

**before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire falls; before man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about in the streets; before the silver cord is already snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. {Eccl 12:2-8 RSV}**

With that marvelous poetry the Searcher describes the awful weaknesses of old age and the actual experience of death. In view of the fact that this is where life is headed for all of us, he admonishes us "remember your Creator in the days of your youth."

I would like to go through these verses again and show you exactly what is being described. Most of the commentators agree that the words, "before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain," refer to the fading of the mental powers of an individual as he grows older. How true this is! When you are young, life seems to stretch endlessly before you; it seems that you will never approach old age. But as you live day by day, life seems to speed by rapidly; it is very brief. You suddenly find yourself exhibiting the appearances and experiences of age. As someone has well said, "Just about the time your face clears up, your mind begins to go!" This is how brief life seems to be.

These mental faculties are described in terms of light. The mind, with its powers of reasoning, of memory and of imagination begins to fade, like the fading of the light of the sun. The reasoning power of the brain, perhaps the greatest gift that God has given to us, begins to lose its ability, and the memory fades. That is one of the first marks of old age. There are three things that indicate the onset of old age: the first is losing the memory, and I can't remember the other two! That is what this verse describes, the fading of the memory, the fading of the imagination, like the stars which fade at the approaching dawn.

"The clouds returning after the rain," is a reference to a kind of second childhood, of senility, which comes on



in old age. As a child, one's life revolves around three simple things: eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom. When one gets old that same cycle returns again.

Then *Qoheleth* speaks of "the day when the keepers of the house tremble." That refers to the arms and the hands, by which we defend ourselves if we are attacked; "the keepers of the house," which are so useful in maintaining the body, which begin to shake and tremble when old age comes on.

"The strong men are bent," is a reference to the legs, the strongest parts of the body, which start to shake and tremble in old age. Old people take very short steps; they can hardly walk. It has been well said that a sign of the onset of old age is when your knees buckle but your belt won't! Some of us are beginning to recognize those signs.

Then he speaks of "the grinders ceasing because they are few." That needs no interpreting for those who have lost many of their grinders through tooth decay. Mealtimes are prolonged because it takes so long to get particles of food lined up with the few remaining grinders!

"Those that look through the windows are dimmed" is clearly referring to the fading of the eyesight as old age approaches. Cataracts form; various eye problems develop. Almost all of us certainly lose the ability to read close-up. We have to hold things increasingly at arm's length to see what they are.

"The doors on the street are shut," is a vivid picture of what happens when the teeth fall. The doors of the face, the lips, fall in, one begins to mouth everything. When that happens "the doors to the street" are obviously shut.

"When the sound of the grinding is low" is thought by some of the commentators to refer to the digestive system. In view of the fact that the grinders have earlier been identified as the teeth, however, it seems to me that this is probably a reference to the fact that when people lose their teeth -- this, of course, was written before the day of dentures -- the old have to resort to gumming their food. That does not result in a lot of noise. It is hard to chew Grape Nuts when you do not have any teeth!

Then, "one rises up at the voice of a bird." I have noticed that in the mornings any sound will waken me. This is characteristic of the aged, who are easily awakened in the morning. Even the sound of chirping of birds outside the window awakens them.

Yet, at the same time, "all the daughters of song are brought low." There is a reference to the increasing deafness of old age. "The daughters of song," those parts of our body by which we hear the song, are brought low; they lose their powers. One of the signs of old age is that everybody seems to talk in a much lower tone of voice than they used to; people mumble all the time, as "the daughters of song are brought low."

Then there is a word on the increasing fears brought on by old age: "They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way." Older people fear almost every step. They are afraid of the cracks in the sidewalk; they are afraid to mount stairs; they are afraid of "what is high." Terrors increase as they go about the streets. Older people tend to stay in. They do not even want to drive at night because they are afraid of things "in the way."

"The almond tree blossoms" is clearly a reference to the hair, which turns white as old age approaches. That is one of the first signs of old age. Like the white blossoms of the almond tree, one begins to take on a quite different look as age comes on.

I never understood until recent days what was meant by "the grasshopper drags itself along." When I wake up in the morning I find myself stiff, and having difficulty walking at times. This increases as one grows old. It results in the infirm and feeble steps of the very aged. "The grasshopper drags itself along."

And finally "desire fails." That is a reference to sexual desire. It may be a great comfort to many of you to see that that is last on the list; it is the last thing to go, according to this.

I want to acknowledge the fact that modern technology has helped solve many of these problems. Wigs can be

bought when the hair falls out, or dentures when the teeth fall out. Glasses, contact lenses, even glass eyes, help with eye problems. Artificial legs, arms and hands, etc., can be fitted, and these are great devices. With all the help that modern technology avails, what a sight it must be when some people get ready for bed! It must be like watching the demolition of a house! We have not moved very far in reality from the days of the Searcher, even though we have devised many ways to disguise aging. Yet even with all these helps in this modern age, what a revelation this is of the up-to-dateness of Scripture.

The Searcher goes on to describe the ways death can occur. The end of life is death. In frankness and openness the Scripture faces the fact that "Man goes to his eternal home." Despite the many passages in this book in which the writer seems to be preoccupied with the grave -- he sees it as the end of all the good things made available to us "under the sun," i.e., in this life -- nevertheless there are several references in the book to the fact that life does not end with death; that human existence goes on beyond death. Here is one of them: "Man goes to his eternal home." The grave is not the end; there is life, there is existence, beyond; this verse recognizes that.

Meanwhile, "the mourners go about the streets." This, the Searcher says, is a result of various forms which death can take. First, "the silver cord is snapped." That seems clearly to be a reference to the spinal cord, that great nerve that runs up and down our backs, protected by our spines. If it is damaged, broken, or diseased, life can suddenly end, as we well know today.

Then, "the golden bowl is broken." That is a reference to the cranium, the skull. A blow to the head, damage to the brain, whatever, may destroy that very essential part of our physical existence and suddenly terminate life.

"The pitcher is broken at the fountain" is a reference to the heart. Heart disease, cardiac arrest, is the most frequent cause of death in the United States today. The heart can suddenly stop; the fountain which continually pours blood through our bodies is broken and ceases its function.

"The wheel broken at the cistern" is a reference to the circulation of the blood. The continual wheel of life which keeps us alive can stop, through degeneration of the veins, through hardening of the arteries; or a blood clot can arrest it and suddenly death occurs.

The result is that the body crumbles: "Dust returns to the earth as it was, but the spirit" -- the part of our humanity which differentiates us from the animals, that part which seeks after eternity, which longs after something beyond life, that part which is restless and empty within us when we have not found the key to life -- "the spirit returns to God who gave it." What a vivid description this is of the ending of life!

The Searcher's conclusion, then, as we have been seeing all through the book, is that life "under the sun," life lived without having discovered the reason for living, is vanity, emptiness, futility. The greatest futility of all is a life that has not found the reason for living. What a waste to live your life and never discover why you are here! What a waste, to die without learning the secret of true existence! That is the Searcher's conclusion. He began the book with it, in Verse 2, and ends here with the same words, in Verse 8 of Chapter 12. He has searched through all of life and reached the same conclusion.

It is clear from this suggestion (to return to Verse 1 of this chapter) that it is hard to find the answer to life when you're old. Not many people do. There are stories (thank God for every one of them) of people turning to God in their last moments of life. Many of us, perhaps, know someone who did that in a real and genuine way. Yet relatively speaking, that is not a frequent occurrence.

Statistics indicate that most people who come to Christ come to him while they are relatively young, under 50 years of age. Ninety-five per cent of all believers come to Christ before they are 50 years old, and most of those before they are 30. Youth is the time to find God. That is what the *Qoheleth* tells us: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth."

Remembering God does not mean merely thinking about him once in awhile. It means to relate to him, walk with him, discover him, learn to know God while you are young. There are two excellent reasons given for

this. First, because "evil days are coming." Old age is setting in, and one of the characteristics of old age is that we lose our ability to change and to learn new things; we are subjected to greater pressures. Those days become "evil days."

I know that there probably has never been a time when youth has been subjected to more temptations and pressures to wrong living than today. Temptation is all around us, it is subtle, it is powerful. The appeal of the world and the flesh is constantly with us, turning thousands of young people away from the truth of God. But I want to tell you this, young people: it will get worse the older you grow. The pressures to conform are greater as you move out into life and business; when you become parents when you become breadwinners and have to establish homes, the pressures to conform, to fit in with all the ways of the world, will be far more intense than they are when you are still in high school or college, or even younger. Evil pressures increase; that is one good reason to remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

Then, secondly, your motivations are highest now. The Searcher says there are coming days "when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" That is, when you will say, "I'm not motivated at all." One of the signs of age is its unwillingness to change, its resistance to new ideas. I have oftentimes observed the tragedy of people who have acknowledged the fact that they had missed the secret of life but they were unwilling to change simply because it was so hard to do so when they were old. This is why the Searcher exhorts young people, "Learn about God now; open your heart to God; seek the wisdom of God now. Learn the Scriptures now, when you are young, while motivation is high and evil pressures are less, and you can discover the secret of living while you are still young."

We have a wonderful example of this in our Lord Jesus. He grew up in a godly home, exposed to the truth of the Scripture, involved with the work of his father in the carpenter's shop. The only thing that is recorded of him in those days is given in the words, "He grew in favor with God and with man." He put God first in his life. He understood that there is the key to life: the secret of learning how to handle all the problems and pressures of life is that you are in relationship and in touch with the Living God who is at work in the affairs of men. Jesus saturated himself with the Scriptures. He could quote them from memory at any time in his ministry because his mind was so filled with what God had said. And he understood these marvelous words. He had such wisdom that when he was only twelve years old he astonished the doctors in the temple by the wisdom which he manifested, asking them penetrating questions they could not answer. Then he went back with his mother and father to finish his boyhood in that home in Nazareth, having "remembered his Creator in the days of his youth."

The last five verses of this book are an epilogue. The Searcher takes us back over the entire book and reminds us of the careful search he made to come to his conclusion. Verses 9-10:

**Besides being wise, the Preacher [the Searcher] also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging proverbs with great care. The Searcher sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. {Eccl 12:9-10 RSV}**

In this rather revealing verse he reminds us how carefully he has recorded what is in the pages of this book. First, he himself learned to be wise. The only source of that wisdom, he tells us, was the Word of God, so he sought through the Scriptures, learned them and then taught the people.

This knowledge of the Scriptures enabled the Searcher to teach with great power and influence, but only after careful preparation. Notice what he did: "He arranged these proverbs with great care." We have noted throughout this book the many proverbs he uses to illustrate the truth he was setting forth. They were not lightly chosen. We must take them seriously. They are not mere one-liners, meant to amuse. They are carefully chosen and carefully arranged to illustrate what he had to say.

More than that he sought for arresting, accurate words by which he could express this wisdom. I am going to preach on this verse to preachers. This is a great way to help them understand that what is necessary in preparation for public ministry is not only an understanding of the subject, but a thinking through of how to say it in such a way that people will listen. That is what the Searcher did.

In Verses 11-12 he underscores the value of this Scripture:

**The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings which are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. {Eccl 12:11-12 RSV}**

All you college students home for Christmas can say "Amen!" to that. "Much study is a weariness of the flesh." But notice how he describes the value of Scripture: it is like a "goad." It prods you and pokes you; you cannot get it out of your mind. It makes you go where you would not ordinarily go; it delivers you by prodding you along.

I suspect many of you have discovered that Scripture is like that. I remember one instance of a man who was in the grip of a terrible depression for more than a year. It had destroyed his family and his marriage; he had lost his job and could not function. But he was delivered out of that by daily meditating on a simple statement he found in Scripture, the only Scripture he could believe at the time, the words of Jesus, "Not my will but thine be done," {Luke 22:42}. Meditating on that day-after-day prodded him, goaded him and urged him to think about his life in those terms. He was brought out of his depression within a relatively short time and never returned to it again. That is how Scripture delivers.

Scripture is also a "nail (an anchor) firmly fixed." You can hang on to it and hold fast by it in times of danger and temptation. Once in my own life when I was severely troubled of heart and deeply disturbed so that I could not even eat, one phrase from the lips of Jesus came into my mind again and again. It was the phrase in the 14th chapter of John, where Jesus said to his troubled disciples, "Let not your heart be troubled," {John 14:1a}. I was especially gripped by those two words, "Let not." They said to me that a troubled heart in the believer is subject to the will of that believer. He can let his heart be troubled or he can let it not be troubled. The ground for letting it not be troubled is in the words that immediately follow: Jesus said, "You believe in God, believe also in me," {John 14:1b}. Again and again he said, "Let not your heart be troubled, for I am with you." When the realization struck me that my Living Lord was there, with wisdom and power to handle the situation, I felt the lifting of my heart's load. I was free to let not my heart be troubled. That is the power of Scripture.

Why does it have this unique power? More than any other book it has this ability. The reason, according to Verse 11, is because, "the collected sayings are given by one Shepherd." These are inspired, God-breathed words. The heart of God is the heart of a shepherd; he sees us as wandering sheep in need of a shepherd's care. The fact that the Lord is our shepherd is probably the reason why the shepherds of Bethlehem were chosen to be the first men to hear the wonderful words of the angels. "This day is born to you in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord," {Luke 2:11 RSV}. They would understand that, as Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way," {Isa 53:6a}. But in the hope that was awakened on that Christmas morning there was the realization that the One who was born in the manger was the One of whom it was said, "the Lord shall lay upon him the iniquities of us all," {cf, Isa 53:6b}. That is where hope comes in life.

"Do not go beyond that," the Searcher says. This is the word of wisdom to scholars and searchers for knowledge: "Of making many books there is no end." You can read yourself to death; you can study yourself to death. As I have pointed out many times, Scripture is not saying that that is wrong; it is right to read and search and know and learn. But beware of letting this take you beyond the simple fact that this book so clearly declares, that God is the secret of life, that he is the answer to the reason for existence. Until we discover him, study and books will never be of any continuing value to us.

This is clearly and finally stated in the two closing verses of the book:

**The end of the matter [the sum of it all]: all has been heard. [Here it is] Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. {Eccl 12:13 RSV}**

I hope you will remove the word "duty" from your version. It is not in the Hebrew, although, unfortunately,

every version seems to translate it that way. It is really this statement:

**Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the *wholeness* of man.**

That is the secret of wholeness. To "Fear God, and keep his commandments" is to learn to be and to discover the secret of being a whole person. Who does not want that? We all want to be whole persons. Not broken, fragmented, easily upset, erratic, going off in all directions at once, but stable, controlled, balanced. Whole people. Here is the secret of it. This is what we are to learn when we are young: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," before all the pressures come upon you. This is the secret of wholeness: "Fear God, and keep his commandments."

Everything hangs upon that word, "Fear God." I know that this is a difficult word for us to comprehend. Most of us think of it in terms of abject terror, of running from God, of seeing him as a threat, but that is never the biblical meaning of the word. I have tried to put it in the form of an acrostic to make it easier for us to remember what the elements of fearing God include.

First, "F" stands for faith in his existence. You cannot come to God unless you know he is there. Hebrews 11:6 says, "He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him." There is where fear begins: faith that God exists. The whole of the created universe is shouting that at us. All the inner responses of our heart are confirming it. The Word of God declares it. History confirms it. There is a world of evidence that God is there. Francis Schaeffer says that this is the great and first truth of the gospel -- *The God Who Is There*.

Then "E": experience of his grace. You never can properly fear God until you have learned what kind of a God he is. He is a God of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness. Until you have stood before him and felt your guilt, acknowledged it, known you were wrong and corrupt, and heard him say in your inner heart, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" {John 8:11 KJV}, you will never be able to properly fear God. One element of fear is the experience of the wonder of forgiveness, that God forgives and sends you out again with a whole new purpose and a new resource available.

That leads to the third element. "A": awe at the majesty, the wisdom and the wonder of God. What a Being he is! What a marvelous mind that can comprehend all the billions of pieces of information in this universe and hold them continually before him, that can hear every voice and relate to every person who has ever lived! What a marvelous God! Awe at the sense of his majesty, his comprehensiveness, his unfailing wisdom and power, is part of fearing God.

The last letter, "R," stands for resolve. Resolve to do what he says, to obey his word, to "keep his commandments," as the Searcher puts it here. There are only two commandments; Jesus himself said that. All the law and the writings can be reduced to two simple things: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind," {Matt 22:37 RSV}. That is in response to his love already shown to you; love him because he first loved you. And two, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's it. As Micah put it, "What does God require of man, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before his God," {cf, Mic 6:8}. There it is: to obey him, to follow him, to keep the commandments. So this is what it means to fear God:

Faith  
Experience  
Awe  
Resolve

One help to that is to remember, as the Searcher concludes, that nothing can be hid from his eyes:

**God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.  
[Ecc 12:14 RSV]**

We can't hide from God. He is evident in all our life. He knows everything that goes on; he knows every thought of the heart, every word of the mouth. He knows the motives that we seek to hide from others. He

sees the duplicity, the deception, the lovelessness. He has made provision for it all; nothing can be hid. Everything is going to come out in the open at last. All the illusions by which we seek to convince ourselves that things are not the way the Bible says they are, will be stripped away and we will see ourselves as he sees us; and there will not be a voice lifted to challenge the righteousness of his judgment.

Because of that the *Qoheleth* exhorts us and sets before us the wonder and the glory of our God and says, "Fear God." Have faith in his existence; experience his grace; stand in awe of his Person; and resolve to obey him. That is what fearing God means. That is the secret to life; that is the secret of the wholeness of man.

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