

# 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 others. The reason for that is that there are certain passages in this book which seem to deny that there is an afterlife, that death is all over when this life ends. Atheists love to contend that the book of Ecclesiastes confirms 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 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 "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we must die" philosophy. Then there are passages in this book which are favorite texts of those who declare that even if we survive beyond this life we enter a period of "oblivion" or "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 limited to what 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 1. 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.

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? {Eccl 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 of David who sat on the throne after him, but this particularly relates to Solomon, as several things

The Searcher raises a very pertinent question right at the beginning. This is the search which this take upon. Verses 4-11, where he amplifies this a little, are a brief introduction to exactly what h Verses 4-7 describe the sense of futility which nature gives us as we live in this natural world; an 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. {Eccl 1:4-7 RSV}

-- the endless cycles of life. The Searcher's theme is stated in Verse 4: Humanity is transient, but permanent. A generation goes and a generation comes -- the human race passes on from this life, 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, heavens, apparently, and sets in the west; then it scurries around the dark side of the earth while sleeping, and there it is in the east again in the morning. That has been going on as long as time h counted, as far back as we can read in human history. It is endless; it repeats itself again and aga

Then he speaks of the circuit of the winds, south to north. This is unusual, because we have no e men understood scientifically the fact that the wind, the clouds and the great jet streams of eart This is evident to us in our day because we can see from a satellite picture in any news broadcast circles of the winds. How they knew this back then I do not know. But Solomon knew it, though 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 returned from a backpack trip to the Sierras. There the mountain peaks were milking moisture fro which passed over all you dry people down here. We had torrents of rain, hail, and even snow fall while we were huddling in our little plastic tents, enjoying this backpack experience. Where does a which endlessly drops out of the sky come from? The answer, of course, is that it comes from th here to the west an invisible evaporative process is at work by which the water that runs into th raises the level of the sea because there is an invisible raising of that water back up into the clou clouds then move east by the circuit of the winds and drop their moisture again, and this goes on

The writer is suggesting that there is something wrong in this. It is backwards, somehow. Man o permanent and nature ought to be transient, he suggests. There is something within all of us tha feel violated that we learn all these great lessons from life, but just as we have begun to learn ho 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 th creation. He is the one who is in dominion over all things. Man ought to last endlessly and nature changing, but it is the other way around. Man feels the protest of this in his spirit. We have all fe protest, inwardly, at least, the injustice of losing the wisdom of a Churchill, the beauty of a Princ the charm of a John Kennedy. Something is wrong that all of this is suddenly taken away from us meaningless cycle of nature goes on and on endlessly. Yes, the human spirit feels that strongly. T 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 weariness. 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 built into life. 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 on another day we had her in our home and somebody mentioned a far-off place. Immediately she said, "I could see that." Despite her years, the eye is not tired of seeing; it longs yet to see other places, 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 the 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 built into life.

But second, he says, even though we long to see or hear something new, nothing new ever really happens. Life is a rehash of what has been before; it is the old played over and over again. That is his argument. The restlessness too is a result of the restlessness that is built into life. Although something looks new to us, actually it is nothing new under the sun." Somebody immediately objects and says, "Wait a minute! They didn't have television, space travel or any such thing until just a few decades ago. Why even you, Ray Stedman, can't 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 darkened rooms. The lights go down, the stars begin to appear above like the brightest stars on a summer's night, and 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 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 the American West where huge geometric patterns have been worked out over acres of ground. These designs obviously been made by man, or some intelligent creature, yet they cannot even be seen unless the

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 this in order 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 the planetarium show was a confirmation of what the Searcher of Ecclesiastes declares, "What has been done will be done, 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, with their 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 the Searcher declares. Our memories are so short that we lose what we know -- and, he suggests, it may happen that 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 was 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 ends? Can no breakthrough be made whereby something can be found that will continually meet the hunger of the 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 glimpse

Furthermore, he was able to investigate even the opposites of things. "I have seen everything," he said, but 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 things 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 know how 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 things that you cannot set straight. Also, no matter how much you may discover, there is information you want to know that you 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 folly, 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. {Eccl 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, 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 called "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"? {Isa 53:3}. Yet this Searcher kept on, despite his increasing frustration that the more he knew the more he knew he did not know. At the close of his life, 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 life of King Solomon, after he had had ample opportunity to investigate all the areas of life and had done so. For a period, which the book of First Kings describes, he fell into spiritual decline, led away by the idolatrous practices 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 reflection.

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 horsemen, 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 a helpful 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. This is not an angry young man speaking. These are the words of a man who has been through it and is now 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 you 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 need 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 of 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 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 the secret I have just stated. Here we have an examination of the various ways by which men have sought to find

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 search.

Here he gives us details of what he experienced. The first thing he says is that he said to himself, "I will give myself over to mirth, laughter and pleasure." so he went in for mirth, laughter and pleasure. You can let your mind fill in the gaps here and see how the palace must have rocked with laughter. Every night they had stand-up comics, and lavish banquets with wine flowing like water. Harrah's Club was never like this! In fact, you may be interested to know what one day's menu consisted of during this time. First Kings records what King Solomon required for the food 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] fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle [prime Grade A meat] 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 you have not experienced this to some degree. Have you ever spent an afternoon with a group of your friends laughing 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 and do not have much basis in reality. It is the same with laughter. Laughter only deals with the periphery of life. There is no solid content to it. "The laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under the pot, and it will scatter like chaff" (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 and rehashed experiences, told jokes, etc., but when all was said and done we went to bed feeling rather 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 the 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 into. Pleasure, Solomon concludes, adds nothing.

Wine, he says, is of no help either. It appears to be. Every social gathering today almost invariably begins with the dispensing of liquor first. The first thing the stewardess says after your plane is airborne is, "Would you like a drink?"



endow beautiful public buildings, but they always manage to get their names engraved on a brass 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 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 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." Verse 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.  
{Eccl 2:7-8 RSV}

Does that sound modern? He had servants to wait on his every whim. The rich always want someone to do all the hard work for them. In this case they were slaves who could not even go on strike if they knew what was happening. Solomon had ranches to provide diversion and profit in the raising herds and



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 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 li

the next chapter there is a similar passage that properly includes the words, "there is nothing better than what it says here. Delete from the text the words, "better than," because they are not 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 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. 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 do not continue. To have added to it the ingredient of pleasure, of continual delight going on and on, throughout the whole of life, you must take it from the hand of God. The man who pleases God is given a 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 that we need for life and godliness." 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 by God. 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, 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 make straight 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 at conference centers around the country, I have often noted the fact that many of these Christian conferences 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 Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, built an English-style stone castle for his British bride. She 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 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 people 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 for multimillionaires in their pursuit of pleasure spent lavishly on their homes in order that their estates would last be given into the hands of those who please God? These lavish spenders will not get anything out of 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 if you take life as a gift from God's hand, responding in thankful gratitude for the delight of the moment, what that seems to come to you? Even the trials, the heartaches and handicaps that others seek to avoid, come with the blessing of heaven and seem to minister to the heart of the one who has learned to take life 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 87 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 of the book. When we finish the book we will find that the Searcher has established without a doubt that joy is found in 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 living. Magazine articles by the dozens tell us how to cope with various problems; TV commercials to a program it seems -- bombard us, telling us how to be successful in life, or at least how to look like it, even if we really are not, health clubs offer us saunas and whirlpool baths to relax us so we can find equanimity; while various kinds of drugs are available to turn us on, turn us off, take us out, or wipe us out.

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 quest ever performed in the history of mankind to test the various approaches to success, enjoyment or fulfillment 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. As you read, for instance, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Verse 4). Throughout this chapter the author propounded that there is an appropriate time for all of life's experiences. Have you ever laughed at a funeral? 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 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 a somber graduation robe, holding a coffee cup in his hand. He is remembered in the annals of Dallas 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, it is an appropriate place to begin. That is the plan that is set forth here. All along, the Searcher, the author of the 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. The first three correspond, amazingly enough, to the divisions of our humanity: body, soul, and spirit. The first four 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 look at this list of opposites, as a list of what God thinks we ought to have. It begins by pairing birth and death, 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 be done at 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 running 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 is always going 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 person. The fact that your physical body is one of the miracles of human history. As the psalmist says, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made."

wonderfully made." How can we understand the fact that each cell seems to pass on to the cell with it the memory of the past so that, even though our brain cells have changed, the memory goes back to 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 and abilities increase, coordination gets better. Then, if you hang on long enough as I have and you reach a milestone, there is a time when everything starts to fall apart -- "a time to break down." Type gets 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 God is telling us.

Then the Searcher moves into the realm of the soul, with its functions of thinking, feeling and choosing. It affects 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 was not handed a beautiful life with everything pleasant and delightful, free from struggle and pain. He was, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," {Isa 53:3b}. In a fallen world it is right that there 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 "a time to mourn," but there is a time to celebrate and to enjoy a festive occasion. Jesus attended 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} a time to break things down, and a time to build them up again. This particularly has to do with our

There is "a time for war, and a time for peace," {Eccl 3:8b RSV}. We ought to remember this as we face 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 nation should be allowed to start one because war can explode into violence far beyond anything demanded by any particular situation. How much is permitted in that regard is a perfectly moot subject, one that is being 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 is not what God has in mind for us. God knows that people who are protected from everything almost invariably end up being impotent and miserable to live with; they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, unprincipled. God sends these things in order that we may 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 verse 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 over? Is there 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 observation 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 both good as well as the positive. These are not curses and obstacles; they are God's blessings, deliberately provided for him.

Even our enemies are a blessing. I received a letter from a businessman friend of mine in Dallas, a thoughtful man, giving me his thinking along this line. He said that there were five types of people one could learn 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 of life, 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 value. We want everything to be smooth and pleasant. More than that, we want to be in charge, we want to be in control, we want to be in 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. As the psalmist 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 heart, 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. An animal is restless and dissatisfied when its physical needs have been met. Observe a well fed dog before the fire on a cold day. He is with his family, enjoying himself, not worried about anything. Put him 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 world 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 eternal. 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 that calls 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 sovereignty 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 in 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 knows of many things that his father has learned. But, resting in the father's arms, he is quite content to let the enigmas unfold as he grows, trusting in the wisdom of his father. That is the life of faith, and that is the life 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:

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 live 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. They themselves give a momentary, not lasting, pleasure. True enjoyment is the gift of God, it is what God has in mind. 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 of us think God is like! I saw a book on sex the other day entitled, "Designed for Pleasure." That is true.

not merely sex that is designed for pleasure, all things are designed for human pleasure. If you think that sex 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 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 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, 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, 9:10}. Until a man recognizes and trusts the superior wisdom of God he has not begun to fear God. It is not abject terror of God, it is respect and honor for him. If you attempt to live your life without recognition of God, ultimately you will find yourself, as the Searcher found himself, empty, dissatisfied, 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 our own lives. That happens to us. That is true even of Christians. When God refuses to go along we sulk and pout at 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 the lessons we have learned some lessons in life and said, "Lord, I see what you are after. I've got it now. You don't need to bring this one back again." Down the road, however, I make the same mistake again. Some circumstances 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's secret yet? 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 come from a variety of experiences. Those will bring but momentary pleasure, but not the secret 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 objects and theses are examined by the Searcher. I am not going to cover all of it this morning, but will take just

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. It was the rawest injustice. How do you square that with this 'wonderful plan for my life?'" The Searcher picks that 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. Last week I was a witness in a case in which a man's business was being destroyed by legal maneuvering. Everyone knew this was unjust, but because of certain legalities no one could get hold of the matter. That kind of injustice creates anger and frustration in many hearts. People say, "What do you mean? How can I 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 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 us 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 become angry at her friend and roommate, whom she had known for years. and in her anger had poured gasoline into the woman's car's gas tank, absolutely destroying the engine. The judge was appalled at the vindictiveness of this attractive looking young woman who had acted in such a vicious way. There is a beastliness about us. 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:

That really should not be a question, as it is stated here in this text. It should read this way: "When 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 standpoint, a dead man and a dead dog look as if the same thing happened to both of them. But from a different 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 goes to God who gave it, but the spirit of the beast ends in nothingness. Injustice stems from our beastliness. 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]

There followed immediately four frequently voiced objections that appear to contradict this idea of 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 newspaper 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 thing 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 wait; 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 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 perfect 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. {Eccl 4:1-3 RSV}

What accounts each of us could list of similar circumstances! Oppression almost invariably preys on the weak.

That is saying exactly what this ancient Searcher is saying. The drive to be admired is the true object of the search. 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 get out of the rat race, they go on relief and let the government support them. We saw 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." 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 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 goal. 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 striving even when they have no one to leave their riches to:

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 will keep 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 cannot prevail against one but two will withstand him, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." While there are many advantages in companionship, nevertheless the Searcher's argument is that still it adds up to emptiness and does not satisfy the sense of eternity that God has put in men's hearts. Many a couple sit in loneliness watching 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: 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 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 again the king is one headstrong and fanatical, convinced that everything he wants to do is right. Even living a long life does not teach us all the lessons, although a long life usually does teach a lot of lessons. But all of us are like that youth who ought to know better, people who have forgotten, as this points out, the lessons they learned from their youth. Here was a king who had gone from prison to the throne because he understood life, he had learned his lessons 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,

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 respect yet he did not learn those lessons either. Although he had the example of his predecessor, he ultimately did not have the respect of others. So even old age, even time, does not always teach us these lessons. It all remains the same: "vanity, emptiness, a striving after wind."

In Chapter 5, a marvelous chapter, the Searcher answers these objections in a wonderful way. There are many 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 as 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 the house with care.

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. The Law was read, and the wisdom of God about life was given to people; this marvelous Old Testament wisdom with its tremendous insights into the truth about life, about what humanity basically and fundamentally needs. 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. {Eccl 5:1b RSV}

A fool is somebody who glibly utters naive, ingenuous and usually false things. What the Searcher has in mind here is our tendency to complain and murmur about what has been handed us in life. When we complain 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 God has given us, even our pleasures, let alone our pain. So he says, listen carefully, for among the people of God the wisdom of God is being declared; the wisdom of God is being set forth. Just this morning a man said to me, "I was going through a painful experience this past week. I learned to see myself and it horrified me. I saw 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. {Eccl 5:2-3 RSV}

Almost everybody takes the phrase, "God is in heaven." to mean that God is off somewhere, high up in 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 world of reality, what is going on that we cannot see but yet is really there. God is in that realm, and 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 see the tremendous complexity and depth of struggle that many of you are going through. But God does only see 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, not upon earth, so for heaven's sake, don't start griping about what God has handed you. That is the whole point of the argument.

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

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,





Secondly,

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

That is, you will soon discover that a crowd of parasites gather around you to spend your money 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. {Eccl 5:12 RSV}

A second disadvantage to having money is that you worry about how to take care of your property, 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. {Eccl 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 Average 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? {Eccl 5:15-17 RSV}

You can take absolutely nothing away with you. Life is empty and meaningless for so many people 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. {Eccl 5:18-19 RSV}

Enjoyment does not come from possessions, or from riches. Nor does it come from companionship, popularity and fame, from the approval and the admiration of others. Enjoyment comes by knowing 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. {Eccl 5:20 RSV}

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

William Randolph Hearst, who amassed one of the great fortunes of our time, ended his days amid opulence and splendor of the castle which he built in Southern California, sitting in a basement, playing 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 about it. They do not talk about the future either because they are so richly involved with the salvation now.

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

Title: Why does God allow This?

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Things that Don't Work: Ecclesiastes

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:20

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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 in a tremendous recession in the United States. In some places it is being described as a return to The 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 people. To a degree or another the hard times ahead. That makes everyone's heart sink a little; we 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 thing for our lives. That is what the Searcher tells us this morning in the passage we will be looking at in Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:20 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, *Deheleth*, 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 evil when it is evil.

Immediately, the Searcher recognizes that to have abundance and possessions -- all that money can buy -- yet lack the power to enjoy them is a very heavy burden to bear. Many people suffer from this. They have the shiny new cars, they have the latest electronic equipment in their big luxurious homes, which they desperately to enjoy, yet their faces have a hollowness about them, their eyes betray an emptiness. They have on occasion stepped into the casinos up in Reno or Las Vegas to see what these places look like. They saw people intent on finding riches, on getting more enjoyment out of life, but they looked like dead men. 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 and cannot enjoy anything they have.

Furthermore, the Searcher says, material wealth and abundance can be frustrating: imagine a stranger who has what you cannot enjoy. Can there be anything more frustrating than getting something you always wanted, and then discovering that it had lost its luster, you no longer enjoyed it, so you passed it on to someone else who could not afford it and he had a ball with it? That would make one very frustrated, even if you say, "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 poured into 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 magazines and catalogs and in commercials that shout at us the opposite message. Enjoyment, however, is a gift

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. 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 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 in him at his word and acting upon that word. This is what pleases God: obedience based upon faith. To the man or woman God gives the gift of enjoying whatever he or she has. How little or how much it is. It is a gift poured out and taken from his hand. That is why gratitude, to be grateful for what you get, is an 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 you are entitled to things. Television commercials in particular constantly tell us this. They hold up some alluring product 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 get. That is the spirit of our age. Do we realize that that contradicts the teaching that the Bible sets for the proper relationship to God? How can we have gratitude if we are only getting what we deserve? We cannot have gratitude 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 with his fellow man, is to give thanks for everything: "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God concerning you."

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? {Eccl 6:3-6 RSV}

Even a big family, which usually brings much cheer, excitement and pleasure to life -- even a long life with many children and grandchildren -- will not of themselves meet man's deep hunger for contentment. A large family may 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. 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 in any way attack it. Furthermore, it will not experience trouble, but the wealthy man will: "It has seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he." Even long life, two thousand years of life

we are like, how we function, what will satisfy and what will not. In view of that, he set up this (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 the 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? {Eccl 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 for you 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 can

restaurants to go to some little hole-in-the-wall that serves good food at a decent price. A good name. Even the poorest among us can have a name for integrity, for trustworthiness. Even though there is poverty 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:

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 pain 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 somebody bribes another to attack you, that is hard for the human spirit to bear; you want to strike back, 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 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 10 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 [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? {Eccl 7:13 RSV}

Under the symbol of crookedness come all those things we call adversities -- painful experiences, 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, {Eccl 7:14a RSV}

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

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.

Title: Things that are not What they Seem  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Things that Don't Work: Ecclesiastes  
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 6:1-7:14  
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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, 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 already seen 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; our best times are those times when we do not have much, when things are tough. In this section, with Verse 15, we learn still another accompanying truth, and that is that the righteous are not always long-lived. In fact, this section declares two great truths: first, that in the real world there is a lot of injustice and unrighteousness; 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. In other words, as the proverb has it, "The good often die young." But the wicked can live to a ripe old age.



into your life. The knowledge of God's power, wisdom and love, his willingness to accept you, to

know it is you; you do not understand yourself. We will be puzzled and confused if we try to solve the mystery of life by thinking we understand ourselves. "That which is far off and deep, very deep, who can find it?" asks Solomon. He realizes that the issue lies deep within himself. To try to understand yourself is 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 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 did not find the answer by wisdom, by trying to reason it out. What he did find was very revealing. That which he discovered was what most of us find when we seek the key to our life apart from God -- bitter 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 himself. 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 he would find it in a relationship with a woman. He went looking for that which would support him, that would strengthen him and make him feel life was worth the living, but what he found was nothing but a sexual thrill. He found himself involved with a woman who did not give him what he was looking for. 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 heart in a relationship after another with men. She said she woke up one morning lying in bed with a man she had just 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 Jesus and became a Christian, and testified to the fullness she found in that relationship. What a powerful testimony. Her record is of what we have here in this passage.



the shine, as the case may be, but it is grace that does it from within; grace makes the face shine and 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 glow with joy? 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 the story of a famous Christian of some generations ago. All of us, whether we know it or not, have sung the hymn by 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, very miserable and hardly even alive. Then he found voyage on a ship back to England. In the midst of a 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 praise of God. 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. 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: 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 reproach 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

# CAN WE TRUST GOVERNMENT?



with Will Rogers, when he said, "We ought to be grateful that we don't have as much government 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 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 president and he represents the power and the authority of government. Here is a recognition that the government has the right to compel, the right of force. Again, Paul reflects this in Romans 13: The government bears 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 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 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 the matter. (We will look into that in just a moment.) But another reason for obedience is that we will avoid 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 tickets.) The original fine for speeding was \$25, but because she ignored it, some months later she received 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 the 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 and is required as unto God.

What is left up to us, the time and the way, is developed in Verses

... 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 for everything, that in God's great overall plan for every individual life there is provision made for sorrow and rejoicing, for tears and for laughter, for war and for peace. Here we are reminded of that: "Every man has his 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 will," 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 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 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 us to do his 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 go 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 always possible 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 will 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? {Eccl 8:7 RSV}

That raises the matter of uncertainty as to the results of obedience to government. One of the things that is 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 was exempt from me to be deferred because that industry was essential to the conduct of the war. But as the war progressed, I saw that my friends and all other young men of my age were enlisting in the service, I found myself becoming 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 that I had 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 need of such teaching. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor, and through that great port there passed every day the 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 men attending.

In Verse 8 the Searcher faces a very sticky point: the possibility of losing your life in obeying the 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. {Eccl 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 may fall. Many a soldier or sailor has said to himself, "Why did I survive when all my buddies were dead? What does God have for me that he would allow me to live?" I have had to ask that question myself. My 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 have your life." God is able to preserve it. The verse clearly states that death is wholly in his hands. No one has power to retain the spirit when God calls it home; no one has authority to choose the day of his death. It 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-or-nothing proposition to preserve something of integrity and value, and as such it requires the wholehearted commitment of 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 good time in his life, had finally found happiness with his new wife, and then he was drafted and put in the army. He was so shaken by that experience that he refused to fight any longer; he laid down his gun and ran. 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 go would demoralize the whole system and open the door for thousands of others to refuse to face battle. It was the unanimous decision of court after court that he should be executed. Finally, his execution was taken, testimony to what the Scriptures here declare: "there is no discharge from war." When a nation is in 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 wearing a uniform and while he is engaged in combat. This verse recognizes the fact that wickedness is not justified thereby.

Many, perhaps, are uncomfortable at this point. You are probably asking yourselves, "Does that mean the government is always right? Don't governments do wrong at times?" The Searcher faces that in the 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. {Eccl 8:9 RSV}

There is an honest recognition of the fact that there is evil in government: "Man lords it over man to his 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 the government arises from the evil in fallen man, living in a fallen world. Who of us is free of evil? Who can claim absolute innocence for all we do? No one. There is none righteous, the Searcher found, not 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. {Eccl 8:10 RSV}

He had been to a funeral of some prominent government leader, a man whom everybody knew was 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 for him, what a wonderful man he was, etc., she said to her son, "Go up and see if that's your father's coffin!"

The second example is found in Verse 11:

That is an interesting phrase which, I think refers to the wicked man's influence after his death. "prolonged like a shadow" is not real life; it is the influence of a man after his death. Reading through history, it is remarkable that though they may have been praised and honored during their lives, 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 and they have not been able to prolong their days like a shadow. God works in life to bring truth and light.

So the Searcher comes to the true conclusion -- this is where this book returns again and again.

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. {Eccl 8:15 RSV}

Do not misunderstand. That is not justification for living it up now, for saying, "Eat, drink and be merry 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, 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 things go the way you like it. It comes no matter what you are going through, as a gift from the God of grace, a relationship with you, is able to give you peace and contentment in your heart in the midst of 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 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 source of contentment, whether you are abased or whether you abound; the realization that a loving Father works out strange and inscrutable purposes, which you cannot always guess at or estimate, through the 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 military registration and are afraid of what will happen; it is not convenient, it interrupts the affairs of life, a lot of things like that: accidents can do that; disease can do that. Life must be taken the way it is. The message 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 in a different way. Scripture faces life just the way it is, but tells us that God has provided an answer, and it is found by those who know how to walk before him, to love him, to fear him, to trust him and to rely on him in his hands. This does not excuse us from the struggles of life, or from the need to make decisions. It does reassure us that those who walk that way will find a source of contentment and satisfaction in the presence 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 and 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, enigmas, that confront us in many of the situations we go through in life, the situations which m

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 ma  
ago. Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life. His solution to the question of the mystery of life was love: "For it is  
alone for which the world is seeking; and it is love alone which can repay." But our Searcher, King  
in his quest to understand the riddles of life, does not agree with that. He found that the secret  
significance, meaningfulness, a sense of contentment about one's life. That is where the answers

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

was written almost 2,500 years ago, it is still true, even in our age of advanced knowledge, that we cannot find all the answers.

Today, many hope that the computer will solve the mysteries of life. The great hope of humanity has shifted to center around this remarkable invention, the computer, with its ability to do far more than a simple human mind can comprehend. I am not denigrating the marvel of computer science; it has changed the world in our age. But even these great computers, with their ability to compress knowledge into micro-chips and store information which once could only have been printed, perhaps, in whole libraries, nevertheless are 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 that they could ever have come to pass, events you could not have anticipated, you can see how true these things are. No one can find out all the answers. Luis Palau has often remarked about the many events that have come together for he and I ever to have met, almost a quarter of a century ago, in a city in north Texas. We met in a rather simple way, yet that event changed both of our lives. That meeting eventually led us into a worldwide evangelistic ministry, and thousands upon thousands have come to Christ as a result. How could that happen? As far as Luis was concerned, it all hung upon a simple decision to go or not go to a meeting one evening. How can we understand that strange merging of simplicity and complexity? Quohelth 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 Quohelth 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. {Eccl 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 a mystery. We 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 often a sign that you are being punished by God. The book of Job is proof of that. Job's three tormentors, called his "friends," were convinced that what was happening to him was a sign that God was angry with him and was punishing him for sin. But by the end of the book it is clear they are totally wrong in that conclusion. 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. Even the computer must agree with God's words, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways" (Isaiah 55:8). That is one of the most difficult lessons to learn in life. We think that because God tells us 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" (Isaiah 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 Sea of Galilee confronts death as the ultimate mystery of life. This is a rather gloomy section. In reading through it, many of you, perhaps, have noted that the author seems to be preoccupied with the thought of death, which is 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 last forever.

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

Everything before the [us] is vanity [emptiness] since one fate comes to all, to the



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, 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 our hopes and pleasures.

Those insightful statements simply mean that we are restless and unhappy until we find an answer in ourselves that will give some unity to our life both now and in that which may follow. Therefore we are 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 Quoth 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

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

Verse 7 is a most remarkable verse, because, in it, there is a statement of what we call in the New 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 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 with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do." This is a recognition, even in the New Testament, of a relationship of righteousness that has already been established. It is true that because of our Lord's coming into this world at the Christmas season, and in his subsequent death and resurrection, this is applied to all the people in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, who had faith in what God has promised. Those who believed his word, and, thus were given the gift of righteousness just as a ~~whole~~ <sup>whole</sup>. Here the faces that as the real basis for life. If you want to find significance in your life, if you want to find meaning, peace and contentment, this is the basis of it: Believe what God has given you already, and on that basis, live your life to the full. Fill it with all that is of value, reason and worth.

Do you have some sense of anticipation about it, with the awareness that beyond death is the finality of all the unanswered, unexplained questions of life? I became a Christian when I was 11 years old. As young boys, I faced life then with mixed feelings of both anticipation and dread. But one thing I ha

In the section we come to this morning, beginning in Chapter 9, Verse 11, the Searcher tells us the most and probably most difficult lesson of all to learn is that natural gifts in themselves are not enough. 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. {Eccl 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, the swift." That is true even in athletics. In the early part of this century Jim Thorpe, the famous 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 up 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 a man whom everybody thought a cinch to win public office, defeated, unable to fulfill his 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 the world. Though Hollywood does its best to impress the American public, the picture that won first prize at the Academy Awards in 1982 was *Chariots of Fire*, the story of a Christian athlete. *Chariots of Fire* 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? We often say, "You have to be the right man, at the right place, at the right time." In other words, the elements of rightness that have to fall together before the abilities that someone may have can accomplish a desire. What the Searcher is saying, of course, is that life is not in our control. The illusion which the mass media presses upon us all the time is that we can handle our life by our choices. "It's your life! You can do it the way you please." So the television commercials probably 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 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 this.

But, his point is, there is a wisdom which can handle that. Even though disaster may strike, it can lead us 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. {Eccl 9:13-16 RSV}

There is no record of this event elsewhere in Scripture. Perhaps Solomon, the greatest king of his time, learned of this from a delegation from some other country. It may be that he was slightly confused about the event recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 20, that did happen, probably when he was a boy. King David sent his son Amnon, and Joab, to capture a traitor named Sheba, who had taken refuge in a small city in northern Israel. Joab gathered an 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 turn to her for help.

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

I want to share with you a paragraph from a full-page ad describing the work of Jesus that the 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 and foolishness, and in the section we have this morning there is a great contrast drawn between the two. What do the Bible mean when it uses those terms? It ought to be clear to us by now that wisdom is to accept the revelation of reality which the Scriptures give us; wisdom refers to actions that are controlled by the will of God. In Romans 12:2 Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world [do not run after all the attractive and 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 the world, which are devoid of insight from the Word of God.

There follows in this next section a tremendous contrast between wisdom and foolishness, which is intended to illustrate on a very pragmatic level that concerns us all this morning. Last week as we talked about some of the counseling matters that we were going through, our elders and pastors learned that at least twenty-three couples here at Peninsula Bible Church who are contemplating or are actually in the process of 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 particular person, aiming this at anyone. But I want to express the deep concern of the elders and pastors about this because it represents a running after the spirit of the age, the wisdom of the world, rather than a running through of the wisdom of God.

We need to understand clearly what the Lord himself has warned us about earlier in this book. In Chapter 4 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 separate 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 world, we've 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 it. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger [the representative of God] that you were a mistake [that is what many are saying today, 'I made a mistake']; why should God be angry with you?"

I want to express the deep sense of sympathy that I personally have, as do all the elders and past 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 marriage, how difficult it was to relate to one another, how easy it would have seemed to walk away from the whole thing and start over. But that is why there are marriage vows -- in order to help us face a difficult 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 need to know something about themselves; that is what we have been seeing from the Scriptures. 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 usually worse than the ones you are trying to run from. Many people testify that the divorce which was thought was so simple a solution to a mistake they thought they had made, only introduced them into a 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 from those who are ready and available to help you through difficult times. Look to the Lord, look to God for help in solving the problems of life. That is what Jesus came for, "to give us hearts to care for 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.  
{Eccl 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, kings 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 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. {Eccl 9:18-10:1 RSV}

This is true of actual battles that nations have fought at times. Oftentimes quiet, biblical principles 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 decisions upon Scriptural principles of non-violent protest. There is a vivid example of how powerful such a principle can be to overcome injustice and outright physical abuse and set things right. This is true in an individual's 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 causes 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,



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



The toil of a fool wearies 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 weary, empty. So much of what we are hearing today leaves you like that. You run after these things, 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 are 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 a way out, there is a step to take, something you can do that is right. If you do the right, another step will come, 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 turns around 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 and sympathize, we know it is difficult. But you are making a sad and sorry mistake if you resort to the way 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 Searcher of Israel is looking over all the philosophies of men and pointing out the things that will ruin 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 will immediately recognize that this is a slight alteration of the title of a book by Dr. Francis Schaeffer. The way of putting the question is, "How Should We Then Live?" I have always been uncomfortable by 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, 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 during 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 should live supportively, that is, to be responsible to work with others, especially with regard to government; secondly, he tells us to live generously, responsive to the needs of those around us. And, thirdly, he tells us to live thoughtfully -- responding daily to the truth that is taught in this book, and in all of Scripture. So

supportively, live generously, live thoughtfully! I give you that at the beginning in case you wake up 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 worshiper of the Word of God includes much to do with government. It is clear that government is part of God's plan.

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 run 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 consequences of Watergate, we can see how much of the turmoil and trouble that we went through in those days came from the insecurity, from the untrustworthy character, really, of the man who was President at that time. Last past week Mr. Jaworski, the investigator of Watergate, died, and the news media reported on his death, struck by one thing that he said. As he was investigating the intrigue of Watergate, the thing that he most forcefully was hearing on a tape President Nixon's instructions to one of his underlings on how to handle the situation as not to perjure himself. That struck Mr. Jaworski as the most serious and solemn revelation of the character 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. ~~One~~ 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, "You 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 impulses. His subordinates also reflect that. They are responsible people who take care of their duties; they 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 Lord how to react to government whether it is good or bad. What should we do? Here are a couple of verses 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 years before someone finally fixed it, so I have to acknowledge that the verse is true. Here the Scripture compares the nation to a house. In the context, the application here is that a people who are given to industriousness, hard work and profitable though demanding labor, are laying the foundation for a strong government, no matter what the leader is like. Without that foundation of hard work and reading 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, life -- bread which enables us to feast together and wine which gladdens life -- is all made available "Money answers everything." The idea is that money supplies everything that is needed; and that 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 people to be given over to a willingness to work, not to have money and things handed out to them. There is running all through the Scripture this recognition of the value of labor. This touches on the welfare state, and on the increasingly luxurious living standards of our day. It declares that a nation healthy, despite the weakness of its leaders, is industrious, hardworking citizens who are v 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 instance of the bugging of a home by the government! It clearly reflects the modern proverb, "Eaves have ears."

Do not complain about the government even in your bedchamber or in your innermost thoughts. This is implying that if you do your complaining might get back to the king and he will be angry with you. Rather, it is the idea that your constant complaining about problems in government creates a spreads dissatisfaction with, and distrust of, government. We may be seeing something of that today 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 about the government that they have learned to distrust it, to feel that it is an unnecessary evil, and to 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 survive the glare of such adverse publicity; it will be impossible to elect him to office a second term because no one 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 meetings last week say that the American way is to elect a man to office, give him six months to change everything he does not do it, spend the next three and a half years complaining about it. That may be close to the truth. It 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 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 if you want to be wise, and in view of all that God provides in life as revealed in this book, then live supportively with 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 those about. This phrase, "Cast your bread upon the waters," was a proverb in Israel for what looked like a 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 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 don't 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 plan of God it may very well return to you some day when you are in need of help. I could relate many stories of people who helped strangers, although they had no idea that their help was even going to be needed properly; then at some later time when they found themselves in serious trouble, that person or those people reappeared in such a way as to help them in their time of need. ~~That is what 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 may happen on earth." That is not limiting us to how many we should have on our help list. This Hebrew phrase "Give a portion to seven or even to eight," was a way of saying, "Give to as many as you can, and don't stop there." 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 are not sensitive to where people are, and the fact that in their pride they hide dire needs. But if we are giving we often are meeting needs that we do not know anything about; if we spread it as widely as possible 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 the 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 weather around. The first reason is that we are to give generously because it is the natural outflow of a fullness of 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 Rocky Mountains 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.

It is obvious that help is everywhere. (States and caused to be helped, it is obvious that help is everywhere.)

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

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

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. {Eccl 11:5-6 RSV}

Notice that twice in those verses is the phrase, "you do not know." Again, this is referring to what I 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 human nature, which distinguishes us from the beast, passed on to the yet unborn fetus? No one knows, but it is true that every child is a human being. This is another verse that clearly supports the anti-abortion movement of our day 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 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 contributed 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.

What did Jesus mean? What he said was literally true. That story from the lips of Jesus has been

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

How, then, should we live? Live supportively of the power of rights of government; live generously 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 break through on a cloudy, gloomy day, so we can enjoy the love of God, the sense of his acceptance of his presence, the feeling that we are approved and accepted by him, the gift of righteousness 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 many," Qoheleth tells us. It is difficult to tell whether this is referring to the interspersing of times of problems in life, or whether (as I think it may) be referring to the ending of our earthly life. (That goes on to ours, is, speak of in the next chapter.) Life is given to us for enjoyment, but the secret we have seen many times already, is not possessions (Jesus underscored that: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses" {cf, Luke 12:15}), but rather a relationship with a Lord. 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 [literally, instead of "pains from your body," it is "evil from your flesh"] 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 rather encouragement to us to realize that God gave us the gift of youth, with its strength, its optimism, 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. They come home, weary and tired, although they have been tearing around all day they still want to walk 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, use it, the strength of it, the cheerfulness of it, the optimism of it. Young people, for the most part, believe that everything is going to turn out all right, so they energetically pursue things. This verse says that.

Youth is the time to plan, to try new things, to explore new opportunities, new adventures. In my youth I had the opportunity, following the outbreak of World War II, to go to the Hawaiian Islands and work in the industry there. It seemed to me a great and enticing opportunity to see new places. I have always regretted that I did that in my twenties, when I could enjoy it to the full. I believe that this is what this verse is saying 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 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 Co 5:10}. The 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 awareness 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.

title refers to the yearning hope of every one of us here this morning, young and old alike, that we might realize our dreams, that we might realize the possibilities of our lives and be wholly and truly what we want to be. This is an especially appropriate theme to consider at Christmastime, when everyone is singing "Silent Night, Silent Night, when joy broke through to an anguished world, when angels announced to the shepherds that the Messiah is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior," a Redeemer, a Recoverer, a way back from a life 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 might 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 before 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 that he is there. The thought is: recall God's presence daily; live in a relationship with him; seek to know the greatness and glories of God while you are still young, before it is too late. We will come back to that later, but first I would like to read the verses that follow, because these define what the Searcher has just suggested is the reason for thinking about and relating to God while one is still young. That is, "before the coming."

Those evil days are described in Verses 2-8, in a vivid and beautiful imagery which describes the actual 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 the 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 process 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 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 old. How true this is! When you are young, life seems to stretch endlessly before you; it seems that you have all the time in the world to 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 as a 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 imagination begins to fade, like the fading of the light of the sun. The reasoning power of the brain, the greatest gift that God has given to us, begins to lose its ability, and the memory fades. That is the first mark of old age. There are three things that indicate the onset of old age: the first is losing the ability to remember and I can't remember the other two! That is what this verse describes, the fading of the memory, 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



in old age. As a child, one's life revolves around three simple things: eating, sleeping, and going to 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 hands, by which we defend ourselves if we are attacked; "the keepers of the house," which are so busy 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 tremble in old age. Old people take very short steps; they can hardly walk. It has been well said that the onset of old age is when your knees buckle but your belt won't! Some of us are beginning to show those signs.

Then he speaks of "the grinders ceasing because they are few." That needs no interpreting for the old who have lost many of their grinders through tooth decay. Mealtimes are prolonged because it takes so long to get the 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 see 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 to the lips, fall in, one begins to mouth everything. When that happens "the doors to the street" are shut.

"When the sound of the grinding is low" is thought by some of the commentators to refer to the grinding system. In view of the fact that the grinders have earlier been identified as the teeth, however, it is more likely that this is probably a reference to the fact that when people lose their teeth -- this, of course, well before the day of dentures -- the old have to resort to gumming their food. That does not result in much 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 wake the aged, who are easily awakened in the morning. Even the sound of chirping 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 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 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 world. People tend to stay in. They do not even want to drive at night because they are afraid of things.

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

I never understood until recent days what was meant by "the grasshopper drags itself along." When in the morning I find myself stiff, and having difficulty walking at times. This increases as one grows older, and 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 the aged 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.

bought when the hair falls out, or dentures when the teeth fall out. Glasses, contact lenses, even help with eye problems. Artificial legs, arms and hands, etc., can be fitted, and these are great devices. All the help that modern technology avails, what a sight it must be when some people get ready for death. It can 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 help in the 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 the book in which the writer seems to be preoccupied with the grave -- he sees it as the end of all things made available to us "under the sun," i.e., in this life -- nevertheless there are several references in the book that recognize the fact that life does not end with death; that human existence goes on beyond death. Here is one: "Man goes to his eternal home." The grave is not the end; there is life, there is existence, beyond; the Searcher recognizes that.

Meanwhile, "the mourners go about the streets." This, the Searcher says, is a result of various forms of death that 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 severed, 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, or a blow to the brain, whatever, may destroy that very essential part of our physical existence and suddenly end life.

"The pitcher is broken at the fountain" is a reference to the heart. Heart disease, cardiac arrest, is a frequent cause of death in the United States today. The heart can suddenly stop; the fountain which 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 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 us which is humanity which differentiates us from the animals, that part which seeks after eternity, which longs for something beyond life, that part which is restless and empty within us when we have not found it -- "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" lived without having discovered the reason for living, is vanity, emptiness, futility. The greatest futility is a life that has not found the reason for living. What a waste to live your life and never discover it! 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 1. He 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 reason for living when you're old. Not many people do. There are stories (thank God for every one of them) of people who turn to God in their last moments of life. Many of us, perhaps, know someone who did that in a real and meaningful 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. Ninety-five per cent of all believers come to Christ before they are 50 years old, and about 75 per cent of those before they are 30. Youth is the time to find God. That is what the Bible says: "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, to be with him, discover him, learn to know God while you are young. There are two excellent reasons given

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 world and the flesh is constantly with us, turning thousands of young people away from the truth. I want to tell you this, young people: it will get worse the older you grow. The pressures to conform become greater as you move out into life and business; when you become parents when you become breadwinners you have to establish homes, the pressures to conform, to fit in with all the ways of the world, will become more intense than they are when you are still in high school or college, or even younger. Evil pressures are 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 characteristics of old 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 you to say, "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 Scriptures, involved with the work of his father in the carpenter's shop. The only thing that is said 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 world 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 things. He had such wisdom that when he was only twelve years old he astonished the doctors in the temple with the wisdom which he manifested, asking them penetrating questions they could not answer. Then he returned 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 tells 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. 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 lightly chosen. We must take them seriously. They are not mere one-liners, meant to amuse. They were 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 want to preach on this verse to preachers. This is a great way to help them understand that what is necessary for preparation for public ministry is not only an understanding of the subject, but a thinking through the subject and saying 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 and 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 in the grip of a terrible depression for more than a year. It had destroyed his family and his marriage, he lost his job and could not function. But he was delivered out of that by daily meditating on a simple truth 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 trial and temptation. Once in my own life when I was severely troubled of heart and deeply disturbed so 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, for I have overcome the world," {John 14:1a}. I was especially gripped by those two words, "Let not." They said to me that a troubled heart of a 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 me, O God, believe also in me," {John 14:1b}. Again and again he said, "Let not your heart be troubled, for I have overcome the world with you." When the realization struck me that my Living Lord was there, with wisdom and power to overcome 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 Bethlehem David a Savior who is Christ the Lord," {Luke 2:11 RSV}. They would understand that, as Isaiah says, "we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way," {Isa 53:6a}. But in that year it was awakened on that Christmas morning there was the realization that the One who was born in Bethlehem was the One of whom it was said, "the Lord shall lay upon him the iniquities of us all," {cf, Isa 53:6}. This 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 to death. As I have pointed out many times, Scripture is not saying that that is wrong; it is right to search and know and learn. But beware of letting this take you beyond the simple fact that this book declares, that God is the secret of life, that he is the answer to the reason for existence. Until we know that, 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) 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 the secret of being a whole person. Who does not want that? We all want to be whole persons. I fragmented, easily upset, erratic, going off in all directions at once, but stable, controlled, balanced people. Here is the secret of it. This is what we are to learn when we are young: "Remember your the days of your youth," before all the pressures come upon you. This is the secret of wholeness and keep his commandments."

Everything hangs upon that word, "Fear God." I know that this is a difficult word for us to comprehend of us think of it in terms of abject terror, of running from God, of seeing him as a threat, but that biblical meaning of the word. I have tried to put it in the form of an acrostic to make it easier for 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. 11:6 says, "He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those that him." There is where fear begins: faith that God exists. The whole of the created universe is shouting 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 final gospel -The God Who Is There.

Then "E": experience of his grace. You never can properly fear God until you have learned what kind he is. He is a God of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness. Until you have stood before him and felt your acknowledged it, known you were wrong and corrupt, and heard him say in your inner heart, "Neither 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 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 is! What a marvelous mind that can comprehend all the billions of pieces of information in this universe hold them continually before him, that can hear every voice and relate to every person who has ever What a marvelous God! Awe at the sense of his majesty, his comprehensiveness, his unfailing wisdom, 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 the law and the writings can be reduced to two simple things: "Love the Lord your God with all your all your soul and all your mind," {Matt 22:37 RSV}. That is in response to his love already shown to love him because he first loved you. And two, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's it. As Micah "What does God require of man, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before his God 6:8}. There it is: to obey him, to follow him, to keep the commandments. So this is what it means

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.  
[Eccl 12:14 RSV}

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

sees the duplicity, the deception, the lovelessness. He has made provision for it all; nothing can be hidden. 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 we are; and there will not be a voice lifted to challenge the righteousness of his judgment.

Because of that, C. S. Lewis 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 love him. That is what fearing God means. That is the secret to life; that is the secret of the wholeness of being.

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