

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THIS?

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

beautiful car!" That is what people want -- to be the center, the focus of attention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Searcher agrees, and lists four advantages to this:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First:

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

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

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

Secondly, he says, listen carefully:

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

A fool is somebody who glibly utters naive, ingenuous and usually false things. What the Searcher clearly has in mind here is our

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

The Searcher continues, Verse 2:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, the Searcher goes on to say,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Secondly,

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

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

He develops this even further:

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

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

There is still a third disadvantage:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notice how the chapter closes:

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

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

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

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

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

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