

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To the man who pleases him." Again, I am afraid many people read that as though it means that some level of religious performance, some standard of morality, like joining a church or coming to meetings, is what pleases God. We must understand

that the Scriptures never say that. Faith is what pleases God, believing him, taking him at his word and acting upon that word. This is what pleases God: obedience based upon faith. To such a man or woman God gives the gift of enjoying whatever he or she has. How little or how much it may be, is a gift poured out and taken from his hand. That is why gratitude, to be grateful for what you get, is the most important element of our lives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-- the unalterable decree of God. The Searcher is telling us here that God has decreed that enjoyment cannot be found by effort, by

work, and by the pursuit of pleasure. Enjoyment must be taken as a gift from God's hand; that decree is as unalterable as the law of gravity. You may not agree with God about it, you may not like it, but there it is; it cannot be changed.

The Searcher points out three things about this:

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

Secondly, it was decreed in view of what man is: "It is known what man is." God made us. He knows what we are like, how we function, what will satisfy and what will not. In view of that, he set up this decree that enjoyment cannot be found from the possession of things. Jesus stated that very plainly: "A man's life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesses."

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

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

The more words, the more vanity, and what is man the better? {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 to argue at all." How do you change that?

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

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

He asks two questions:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this proverb the Searcher is saying that a good name is truly influential. It is not like perfume, which does not do anything near what it is said to do. A good name endures. One will pass by a lot of garish looking restaurants to go to some little hole-in-the-wall that serves good food at a decent price. A good name attracts. Even the poorest among us can have a name for integrity, for trustworthiness. Even though there be affliction and adversity -- you may not be able to afford Chanel No. 5 and other expensive perfumes -- but you can always afford a good name.

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

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

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

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

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

Not only gladness, but wisdom. Verse 4:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he adds to that,

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

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

Finally, he speaks about wisdom:

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

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

He continues:

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

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

But now he comes back again to his conclusion:

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

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

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

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

Day by day and with each passing moment,

Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.

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

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

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

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

An unknown poet has written,

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

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

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

Prayer:

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

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