

AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even when men claim to know the answers behind what happens to us, they are really only deceiving themselves. This is a tremendous statement. Many people are unwilling to accept the truth of Scripture until they can understand everything in it. But if you are waiting for that you will never make it. Although this book was written almost 2,500 years ago, it is still true, even in our age of advanced knowledge, that no one can find all the answers.

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

When you think about your own life, about how many of the things that have happened to you have been determined by events over which you had no control, and which had to fall together in a certain pattern before they could ever have come to pass, events you could not have anticipated, you can see how true these words are. No one can find out all the answers. Luis Palau has often

remarked about the many events that had to come together for he and I ever to have met, almost a quarter of a century ago, in a city in northern Argentina. We met in a rather simple way, yet that event changed both of our lives. That meeting eventually launched him into a worldwide evangelistic ministry, and thousands upon thousands have come to Christ as a result of it. How could that happen? As far as Luis was concerned, it all hung upon a simple decision to go or not to go to a meeting one evening. How can we understand that strange merging of simplicity and complexity? The *Quoheleth* argues that life is too complicated for us ever to answer all the questions and understand all the mysteries. We must learn to cry with the Apostle Paul, "O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" {Rom 11:31 RSV}

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

But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate man does not know. {Ecc1 9:1a RSV}

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

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

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

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

Everything before them [us] is vanity [emptiness] since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate [one event] comes to all; also the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. {Ecc1 9:1b-3 RSV}

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

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

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

death through sin," (Rom 5:12). Death spread throughout humanity because there is evil in us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brooks Alexander continues:

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

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

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

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

Notice how *Quoheleth*, then, continues:

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

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

So we are not to seek after comfort, but significance. What are you living for? That is his question. What are you dying for? What

is the purpose of your existence? I would urge every one of us individually to come to an answer to that. Why are you here? What is it all about? If life has any purpose at all it must be found in what happens now. The attempt of this book is to bring us to the answer to that, to help us to see what that purpose is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do we live like this?

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

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

enable us to handle it. Do we view life that way?

What is your view of your approaching death?

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

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

Prayer:

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

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