

HOW, THEN, SHOULD WE LIVE ?

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But we can also get good government. *Qoheleth* tells us, "Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of free men." Literally, the phrase, "son of free men," ought, perhaps, to be translated, "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 moods or his impulses. His subordinates also reflect that. They

are responsible people who take care of their duties and feast at the proper time, and then only to gain strength, not merely to get drunk.

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

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

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

The second proverb continues the same thought:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was encouraged last week that several of our staff wrote letters to Mayor Dianne Feinstein in San Francisco to commend her for her vetoing of an ordinance designed to give equality to live-in lovers as though they were married couples. That would be very destructive to the social fabric. Against much of the popular opinion of the hour, Mayor Feinstein found the courage to veto that measure. I was blessed and encouraged by the fact that several of our staff wrote and supported her in that. What a difference it

makes in the quality of government if we show our support for those who are in office. The appeal of the *Qoheleth* is that if you want to be wise, and in view of all that God provides in life as revealed in this book, then live supportively of the government.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A week or so ago I was entranced in watching the weather reports about Hurricane Iwa, which hit the Hawaiian Islands and dumped billions of gallons of water. Then it moved across the Pacific and hit the West Coast, dumping billions of gallons of water upon us. It moved up into the Sierras, then into the Rockies and across into the Plain States and caused much of the flooding that is going on this very day in Missouri, Arkansas and the Mississippi Valley. Then it moved across the nation and dumped water again on the East Coast, passing out at last into the Atlantic. Like clouds that are full of rain, a life that is full of the blessing and grace of God ought to shower others with that blessing. Remember the words of Jesus, "Freely you have received, freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8}. God has blessed us abundantly in this country. Despite this present recession we are still the richest nation on earth, the poorest among us are better off than so-called rich people in many countries of the world. God has richly blessed us. We are to give because it is the natural outflow of a life that is already filled with the blessings of God, not only physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

The second parable about the tree falling to the south or north is somewhat more difficult, but the other day I saw a motto in someone's kitchen that captures exactly what this idiom is saying: it was the slogan, "Bloom where you are planted." That is, it is God who controls the fall of the tree out in the forest; whether it falls to the south or the north is within the scope of divine providence to determine, but where it falls, that is where it is to be. This is Solomon's way of saying to us, "Where God has put you, in your present circumstances, that is where you are to give. Meet the needs around you. Supply the needs of those with

whom you come in contact." That does not always mean geographically. You may be in touch with someone halfway around the world whose needs you are aware of, but God has brought that to your knowledge so that you can meet that need.

There is another reason given in Verse 4:

**He who observes the wind will not sow;
and he who regards the clouds will not reap. {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 before you start giving. This is a good word to young people. You sometimes think that because you have a limited income you do not have to give, but if you wait until you get enough to live on before you start giving you will never give. Give as the need arises, as the opportunity comes, as far as you can; that is the exhortation here.

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

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

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

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

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

What did Jesus mean? What he said was literally true. That story from the lips of Jesus has been repeated all over the earth, in every culture and clime. For two thousand years it has been told again and again. It has motivated more people to give than any other story ever told. Thus it is literally true that in the wisdom and power of God that tiny gift was so multiplied that it has outweighed all the giving of any single gift from any individual, no matter how rich, throughout the history of Christendom. That is the power of God to use our gifts. We do not know what he is going to do with the money and the help that we give. Nor do we understand the timing of God. You cannot say that a gift given at some particularly prosperous time of your life, larger in amount than you could give at any other time, is going to be used more greatly of God than any small gift that you may give. You cannot tell whether the fifty cents or dollar gift given when you were in high school or college may be used of God to produce great benefit in the lives of others, or that something given in old age might not do the same thing. We do not know the power of God or the timing of God. But we are encouraged to give, because "God loves a cheerful giver," {2 Cor 9:7b RSV}. He changes and blesses lives, he changes the history of the world by the phenomenon of Christian giving. So, live generously, says *Qoheleth* .

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

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

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

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

We have seen all through this book that enjoyment does not come from things. "The days of darkness will be many," *Qoheleth* tells us. It is difficult to tell whether this is referring to the interspersing of times of trial and problems in life, or whether (as I

think it may) be referring to the ending of our earthly life. (That is what it goes on to ours, is, speak of in the next chapter.) Life is given to us for enjoyment, but the secret of it, as we have seen many times already, is not possessions (Jesus underscored that: "A man's life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesses" {cf, Luke 12:15}), but rather a relationship with a Living God. Let us rejoice because of that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Remember too that "youth and the dawn of life are vanity." Even that glorious experience of youth is not the reason why life was given. Here again we see a challenge to the secular illusions that we are subjected to all the time. In the media we are told that youth is the great desideratum. Youth is what is held up for us to emulate. We are exposed to a thousand invitations to find the secret of recovering or preserving our youth: "Buy this new salve to smear on, perfume to spray on, or device to wear to preserve your youth." But youth, according to the wise words of Scripture, is in itself emptiness. It is not vitality that will satisfy, but a

relationship with a Living God. Life finds its fulfillment, its meaning and its significance only as you develop a relationship with the Living God daily through your life. That is why *Qoheleth* goes on to say in the closing chapter, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," {Eccl 12:1a RSV}.

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

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