

April 29, 2018

The Strangest Secret

READ: Ecclesiastes 9:2, 3a (Common English Bible)

“Everything is the same for everyone. The same fate awaits the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the pure and the impure, those who sacrifice and those who don’t sacrifice. The good person is like the wrongdoer; the same holds for those who make solemn pledges and those who are afraid to swear. This is the sad thing about all that happens under the sun: the same fate awaits everyone.”

REFLECT:

Some years ago the popular motivational speaker, Earl Nightingale delivered a radio address that would result in the formation of a corporation – the Nightingale-Conant Corporation – the sale of millions of cassette tapes of that message and, anecdotally, learn that just as many lives were changed by that one message. That message is widely recognized today: *The Strangest Secret*. Simply, the strangest secret is, “we become what we think about.” Nightingale said that the fact very few people have learned it or understand it seems strange. That is why, for some equally strange reason, it virtually remains a secret. Equally strange is how few people have grasped the truth advanced in these few sentences from the Old Testament: “Everything is the same for everyone.” This may well be the strangest secret of the Bible.

Naturally, this denies the old heresy that only good comes to the righteous and that suffering comes only to the evil. A heresy it may be, but one that is very much active in the Christian faith today. Many in the church act as though a sincere follower of Jesus Christ is not attacked by cancer, lose a child, or suffer financial setbacks. The question is heard often on the lips of faithful followers of Jesus, “What have I done to deserve this?” The question is as old as the Book of Job in the Old Testament and as fresh as a recent calamity in any congregation. The premise that God rewards faithfulness and visits suffering upon the faithless has no support here in Ecclesiastes. Again, “Everything is the same for everyone.”

Though this teaching sparkles brightly through the pages of the Old and New Testament, it is often received by Christians as somewhat of a surprise – as a secret now brought out of the shadows. Strange, isn’t it? Something that is so clear on the open pages of the Bible yet so few ever grasp it. Again and again the apparent cloak of secrecy must be removed by those who teach and preach God’s word. Once removed, the conversation changes. The old, familiar question, “What have I done to deserve this?” becomes, “How shall I respond to this?” The former question results in resentment, bitterness, anger, and rebellion. The latter question seeks God’s strength and direction for tomorrow. Understanding the truth always changes our reaction.

Often I hear people say that the goodness of God – and God’s very existence – is denied by the suffering of this world: “How can there be a God of goodness when people must pass through such pain?” Yet, the scriptures boldly declare that the goodness of God is proved by the existence of suffering and pain. Psalm 23, a deeply loved passage from the Old Testament, asserts clearly and forcibly, “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you (God) are with me. Your rod and your staff – they protect me (Psalm 23:4).” God’s strength and care are experienced in the midst of suffering, not its absence. Persons of faith do not look backward in the day of calamity and ask, “Why?” They look forward, confident in God’s continuing care.

