

A Healthy Perspective – But Is This All There Is?

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, 20; I Corinthians 15:54, 57

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end... There is nothing better...than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live..." Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

"All go to one place; all are from the dust and all turn to dust again." Ecclesiastes 3:20

"Death has been swallowed up in victory... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." I Corinthians 15:54,57

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament is an attempt to gain knowledge of human existence in order that one may know how to live—how to live wisely, how to live well. It's a special genre of literature. It has a different nuance, a different tone, than so much of the rest of Scripture. It raises those questions about the nature of our experience of being human, seeking to find the meaning and purpose of it all. And it reads that meaning and purpose off from experience itself; it doesn't go to a priest, it doesn't go to a sacred text, it doesn't go to an institution, but rather the sages of the tradition of Israel were careful observers of life, trying to discern meaning and purpose from what was observable and what could be comprehended within the parameters of human knowledge and human understanding.

With Ecclesiastes, we come to the farthest extreme of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures. The author purports to have lived widely, broadly, deeply. He tried everything—pleasure, riches, work, everything that his heart desired he granted to himself. And, in the end of it all, his conclusion was that human life is empty. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, says the Lord." Chasing wind. He is a person, who having entered broadly into human experience, concludes that its meaning and its purpose is not discernible by the human mind. Just reading from human experience, he can find no ultimate purpose. He doesn't deny that God is, he doesn't deny that God will hold us accountable, but God is largely absent and God is inscrutable. The meaning of our human existence is inscrutable. So this is a very pessimistic account of what it means to be human. He simply says over and

over and over again... there is nothing new under the sun...whatever has been will be again. It's an endless cycle... a dead end street or, as in the title of the French existentialist Camus' novel, *No Exit*. That is his analysis of the human situation from what he sees in human experience. He recognizes that the human person isn't satisfied with that. He himself isn't satisfied with it. He says God has "put eternity into the human heart." It's a wonderful phrase isn't it? "Put eternity into the human heart." Or the other translation is that God has put it into the human mind to know that there is past and future, but without being able to discern what God is up to. If there is anything that distinguishes the human person, it is that, while knowledge is limited, nonetheless there is a consciousness of those limits. And the consciousness of those limits makes the human person restless—always trying to transcend those limits, always trying to reach out beyond, always trying to break through. But to no avail, he says.

I have often spoken of the writer of Ecclesiastes as cynical, but I think that's the wrong word. The more I reflect on it and the more I come to understand the Wisdom literature, he was not cynical, he was sad. He was lonely. He was disappointed. He wanted to find something. He wanted to break through. He wanted to penetrate the barrier, but he couldn't and he felt a sense of alienation. He wasn't sure that there was anyone home. From what he could observe about human experience, there certainly wasn't anybody with any kind of logical purpose that could be discerned, no management in control. He was sad, so he said the conclusion of the matter is this: Human experience is empty.

I sort of like this writer because he is honest person, so honest he almost didn't get into the Old Testament Canon. (There is only so much reality we can stand, and you can't have too much truth in church.) You say, "How did the book ever get in there," and I would have to say, "With great difficulty." But in the Synod of Jamnia," in about 100 AD the rabbis put the book of Ecclesiastes into the thirty-nine books that we have in the canon and called it part of Hebrew Scriptures. You might still seriously ask, "What is it doing in the Bible?" I want to respond by suggesting that there *ought* to be a place in our religious devotion for expressions like Ecclesiastes. I want to suggest that we've got far too much piety and firm assurances of faith, and arrogant triumphalism. What we need is a healthy dose of Ecclesiastes, particularly in church.

In the harvest festival of the Jewish people, the Festival of Booths celebrated in the fall, they read on the fourth day of this celebration the book of Ecclesiastes, just in order to lace into the celebration this very somber note. I want to suggest that it is a healthy corrective to what generally comes spewing forth from preachers' mouths. Isn't there a place for a document within our religious book that says, "I can't make sense of it at all"? I mean, be honest with me. Haven't you ever had days like that, or seasons? Have you had periods of your life when you had to say as you left church, "I really don't believe it." Would I scandalize you if I said that sometimes when I climb off this pulpit I have to say, "I can't figure it out. I don't understand it." You know, it is not as simple and as neat as we

preachers try to portray it. I want to make a plea for listening to the writer of Ecclesiastes, not as a cynic, but certainly a skeptic, a thorough-going agnostic, who simply confesses that the data of human experience doesn't add up to anything meaningful as far as he can determine. Don't you need, sometimes, not to feel that you are somehow or other excluded from the community of faith just because you can't figure it out? Isn't it good to know that even in the Bible itself there was someone who at least in one period of his life threw up his hands and said, "You know, it doesn't make sense. God is inscrutable. Human experience is inscrutable. I can't figure it out. I don't know what to make of it."

The questions that are raised by one like the writer of Ecclesiastes are the questions that are raised in a culture like ours, in which we have the luxury of being able to take a step back and think and reflect on life. You won't find this kind of philosophical questioning coming out of Rwanda today. Those poor folk are simply trying to keep body and soul together. They are trying to survive. You don't find dissertations on the meaning of human existence or the purposes of God in primitive cultures where it is simply a matter of day-by-day existence. No, you find these questions in an advanced culture, in an advanced stage of civilization where people do have the time, the luxury, to think reflectively about their life and their experience. What happens when people begin to think this way, and reflect on their life is that they are not necessarily content just to take the given answers—to take the whole package wholesale, when their human experience runs onto the rocks of reality and where the old answers don't make sense, where human experience collides with the traditional given and accepted line. In such a situation one comes to the kinds of questions that the writer here raises. That's the kind of culture we live in. There was a day, there were centuries, when the old answers simply weren't questioned, when no one stopped to say, "But is that really true? Do I really believe that?"

In the modern period, beginning with the eighteenth century, when human experience and human knowledge exploded all over the place, people did begin to try to relate that explosion of knowledge to the structure of their faith. What happened is that the church as an institution, and authority figures such as myself, got very nervous because of that explosion of knowledge. Faith and human experience brought together in some kind of reconciliation is not so simple. So, if you would read the history of the modern period you would find that there was a growing bifurcation of the academic world and the Church, thoughtful people, the best and the brightest who raised their questions but got the cold shoulder in the Church and, therefore, the body language pushed them out, until you have a whole society today in the West which is largely alienated from the Christian Church. We don't get a true sense of that in Western Michigan. This is a kind of ghetto; we are a minority of people and we are not keeping up. But in Western Civilization, Europe, the Continent, the institutional church is in trouble, not addressing civilization, not addressing culture with the dilemmas that face culture today. So, the whole explosion of knowledge, the development of the natural sciences, the technological revolution, which created

the modern world in which we live six days out of seven, all of that sort of drifted off on its own because we got very defensive. We really didn't want to hear the questions. There was trouble on both sides, of course, but eventually there was a shrinking body of people who were a people of faith, and a large body out there that were alienated at least from the institutional forms of religion. What happened? The writer of Ecclesiastes is absolutely right. If you try to live in this world in a human way, strictly within the parameters of what's possible in human knowledge, you're going to come up empty. That's where modern society has come. It has come up empty.

We recently celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Woodstock, which was a symbolic expression of the 60s. The 60s has become that symbol for the rebellion against institutional forms and the foundations of Western culture. In the Church we widely decried that whole movement and were scandalized by hippies and long hair and beads and earrings. The alienation and the gulf grew even greater, but all that was symbolic of the fact that the writer of Ecclesiastes has it right, that human existence pursued in strictly human fashion, a one-level fashion within what is possible by human knowledge and understanding, comes up empty.

Like I said, the writer to Ecclesiastes was not cynical; he was sad... he was lonely... he was disappointed. What has happened in the modern culture with the emptiness, because certainly you could write the model of Ecclesiastes over our culture today, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Emptiness. Therefore, the rush to drugs, alcohol, sexual license—describe what you want about the ills of our present culture, and you probably could not over react against it. But, what is it? It is not just bad people. It is the hungry human heart questing for meaning, looking for purpose and meaning that is denied an analysis strictly based on human experience. If all you know is what you can observe in human experience, you cannot come to that transcendent dimension which is planted in the human heart, but which cannot be grasped. So, where there is a vacuum it will be filled, and it has been filled with a lot of the wrong stuff, to the disaster of so much of our culture today.

What does the Church do? It grows fearful. It grows conservative. It becomes fundamentalist in its outlook. In the political realm—conservatism, law and order, crime bills. In the theological realm—fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the reiteration of yesterday's answers to today's questions. It is irrelevant. The body language of the Church that wants to go back to a former day where righteousness reigned says to the world out there, "You are condemned—the judgment, the condemnation, the self-righteousness, super holiness of the people of God stinks! Super holiness of the people of God stinks in the nostrils of the world. The world may be hungry, and it may be longing for something, and it may be at loose ends, but it will not take the arrogance and the triumphalism of the Church that thinks that all the world has to do is come on back into the

seventeenth century. That, it seems to me, is a mistake of large segments of the Church today.

The Jewish community, I noted, reads the book of Ecclesiastes on the fourth day in order to interject a somber note into the celebration. I would like to go to some of the praise gatherings of the Christian Church across the country and read the book of Ecclesiastes in the midst of all the singing and foot stomping. I would like to say, "What are you all worked up about? What are you all excited about? You haven't begun to see the depth of the question, the seriousness of the social situation. All you are doing is attacking the symptoms of the culture and never getting down to the root of a human heart that is empty and longing for God." A human heart that is empty and longing for God and that has lived in this modern world is not going to go back and knuckle under authority figures like priests or institutions like the Church, or a sacred text. Oh, I have to admit there are more that do that than I would believe possible. I can't believe how easily the masses can be led like sheep. But I have got to say to you that I believe that the writer of Ecclesiastes gave an accurate and honest analysis of the human situation seen strictly within the parameters of human observation and human knowledge. The end of that is emptiness and sadness and loneliness, but what will not work is to trot out a paradigm out of the seventeenth century, to try to go back to the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

What we need to do is to appropriate all of the explosion of knowledge and the understanding of the human situation and the cosmos and the environment, and all of that and then begin to sit down and to reason together, to learn what the real questions are and to begin to communicate in a level of reasonable discourse, to be sensitive to the hunger of the human heart and the anguish of the human soul that acts out in all kinds of self-destructive ways, rather than simply to condemn the masses as though somehow or other they have become animals and that culture is going to finally explode and go to hell.

You see, we're not so smart. We don't have the answers. The writer of Ecclesiastes was right. You just look at the human situation and what he says is right. Things don't add up. So you are faced with an alternative. Either throw up your hands like he did and say, "Eat and drink and work, and grasp what little bit of pleasure there is at the moment." Or you hear the witness of, for example, Paul who was encountered from beyond himself and came face to face with Jesus Christ. The alternatives are not matters of intelligence or accurate analysis. The alternatives are matters of the posture of the heart. It is a matter of looking at the data, and then trusting or not trusting.

Jacque Monod is a world-class biologist, a Nobel Prize winner who wrote the book *Chance and Necessity*. What he describes in these little lines that I will read could very well be the modern description of the human situation to which the writer of Ecclesiastes referred. Monod writes this,

"If he [that is, the human person] accepts this negative message, [that is, what he can read from the human situation, the cosmological situation], in its full significance, then one must at least awake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes."

That is honest and hard hitting, and clear eyed. If there is no one home in the universe, then we are alone and the world is deaf to our music. The world is indifferent to our hopes, to our sufferings, to our crimes. So says Monod, so says the writer to Ecclesiastes. That's as much as you can decipher. That's as much as you can discern just from the observation of human experience. On the other side of the coin, an equally intelligent twentieth-century person, Hans Küng, in his book *Does God Exist?* wrote this:

"To trust in an eternal life means, in reasonable trust, in enlightened faith, in tried and tested hope, to rely on the fact that I shall be one day fully understood, freed from guilt, and definitively accepted and can be myself without fear, that my impenetrable and ambivalent existence like the profoundly discordant history of humanity as a whole will finally one day become profoundly transparent, and the question of the meaning of history one day finally be answered."

He agrees with Monod, he agrees with the writer to the Ecclesiastes—"my impenetrable and ambivalent existence," but this is written by one who trusts.

St. Paul addressed Greek culture, Greek classical culture. Greek culture is called classical culture, classical because it has never been surpassed, a gigantic achievement of the human spirit. Paul came there and proclaimed Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Some laughed, and some believed. Some said, "I don't believe it," and some said, "God, I believe it." Paul in writing to these people said that the parameters of human experience, this flesh, this perishable, this is not all there is. This has to be overcome, this perishable has to put on imperishable, this mortal has to put on immortality. Then will be brought to light that which has said death is swallowed up in victory. Paul said that because he was encountered by one whom he believed to be Jesus, whom he knew to be crucified, whom he experienced to be living, whom he therefore deduced was God's "Yes" to this world, to this ambivalent, impenetrable human experience. God had acted in the case of Jesus, had brought him to life, had said "Yes" to the Way of Jesus, and that simply, absolutely changed everything so that Paul could write to the Church of Corinth, "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, in as much as you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Empty. Chasing the wind. The writer in that old Hebrew book said, "Vanity. Empty." Paul said, "Not in vain," because this is not all there is, because the story cannot be written simply from the data available to the human mind observing human

experience. There is, in other words, the possibility of the gift of sight, of trust that breaks through and that washes all with a radiance from the eternity which the Creator has planted in the human heart.

Most of the time the Church reads Ecclesiastes and makes a beeline for Jesus, not even hearing the question, not admitting the depth of the dilemma. I hope I haven't done that. But if I couldn't conclude where I just concluded I'd have to get out of the business. I believe that the best is yet to be, and I never believed it more strongly than when I am preaching a funeral message. And as long as I can still preach before a gaping grave with hope, I'll keep preaching.