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ECCLESIASTES: A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

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E. Stanley Jones, in his book *Growing Spiritually*, tells the story of a fictional person who lived out a fantasy life. All this man had to do was think of it and (poof!) it happened. So, in a moment of time, he sticks his hands in his pockets, leans backs, and imagines a mansion and (poof!) he has a fifteen-bedroom mansion, three stories high, with servants instantly available to wait upon his every need. Why, a place like that needs several fine cars. So he again closes his eyes and imagines a driveway full of the finest wheels money can buy. And (poof!) there are several of the best vehicles instantly parked in his driveway. After being driven about for a while by the chauffeur, he returns home and wishes for a sumptuous meal. And (poof!) there is a fabulous feast of food in front of him—which he eats alone. And yet .□□there is something more he needs . . . he needs to find happiness. Finally, he grows so terribly bored and unchallenged that he says to one of the attendants, "I want to get out of this. I want to create some new things again. I'd rather be in hell than be here." To which one of the servants replies quietly, "Where do you think you are?"

You and I live in a world that longs for this fantasy life. We live in a world that proclaims, "Go ahead. You owe it to yourself." "If it feels good, do it." We live in a world that sings, "It can't be wrong when it feels so right." And we live in a world that bombards us with commercials which preach, "You only go 'round once in life. So grab for all the gusto you can." A current commercial, and a favorite of mine because of its ludicrous message, declares: "It doesn't get any better than this."

There once was a real man, not a fictional one, who did have everything he desired. That man was Solomon. "Anything I saw and wanted, I got for myself. I did not miss any pleasure I desired" (2:10—Unless otherwise indicated, references are to Ecclesiastes).

For many a twentieth-century "man on the street," life is a puzzle. He feels that he, like his culture, has become plastic. For just as plastic symbolizes the chief achievement of research and technology and is the primary product of massive sales and distribution agencies, so also plastic people feel that they are nothing more than the fruit of sociological research and the victims of constant manipulation by economic, political, social, and religious bureaucracies. In short, life has lost its zip. After all, we are nothing more than a number in someone's computer.

Is there no one home in the universe? Is God dead? And if God is dead, doesn't there just have to be someone or something else out there? There has to be, or we are stuck.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, nestled in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, is the best news around for the baffled, bewildered, and bored. It is the book for the person who wants to live again—now. It is the working individual's book: it answers the monotony of the routine of joylessly eating, and drinking, and earning a paycheck. It is also a book for thinkers. Its author knew that the thinking person is haunted by such questions as, Who am I? What is the meaning of life? Should I be "worldlier than thou" or "holier than thou"? Or is there a third alternative of somehow accepting the world and honoring God as well?

Ecclesiastes has as its central concern that basic hunger of humankind to see if the totality of life fits into a meaningful pattern. Can this age of satanic rule and the eternal age to come both be accepted, enjoyed, and understood as parts of one plan? If God was so active in times past, where is He now? Where is the sovereign direction of a wise, powerful, and good God when suffering Christians need Him most and seemingly He is not there? Ecclesiastes was written to answer questions such as these. In many ways, it is a companion book to Job.

If you pick up a book and want to find the author's viewpoint, where do you turn? You may read the preface—sometimes it saves you from reading the book. The conclusion in a well-written book usually sums up the point that the author has been trying to make, so you may look there. When you browse through the book, you may be struck by something like a refrain, a recurring idea, that tends to drive a particular point home. Well, let's apply these methods to Ecclesiastes and see what we get.

The preface is a gaunt and stark announcement, "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (1:2). To me, this is the trumpets sounding the opening theme of some colossal overture. From the preface we turn to the conclusion. Here, in 12:8, we find the words of the preface recurring: "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Everything is meaningless!'" However, the final conclusion is definitely presented as the final conclusion in 12:13-14: "Now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Now, if this is the deliberate conclusion of Ecclesiastes, and if the book is a literary unit (and if the author is competent enough to be consistent), it stands to reason that no statement in the book can be interpreted as a final conclusion if it contradicts the statement at the end of the book. Or, to put it another way, if any statement in the course of the book sounds like a final conclusion, it must be interpreted in the light of the ultimate conclusion at the end.

The third way of finding an author's point of view is to see whether there is any phrase or statement that recurs as a sort of refrain. While the themes of "meaningless" (1:2,14; 2:1,11, 15,17,19,21,22,26; 3:19; 4:4,7,8,16; 5:7,10; 6:2,4,9,11,12; 7:6,15; 8:10,14; 9:9; 11:8; 12:8), "under the sun" or "under heaven" (1:3,9,13,14; 2:3,11,17,18,19,20,22; 3:1,16; 4:1,3,7,15; 5:13,18; 6:1,12; 7:11; 8:9,15,17; 9:3,6,9,11,13; 10:5; 11:7), "I have seen," "I saw," "I know," "I thought to myself," or "I thought in my heart" (1:14,16; 2:1,13, 15,24; 3:10,12,14,16,17,18,22; 4:1,4,7,15; 5:13,18; 6:1; 7:15,27; 8:9,10,17; 9:1,11,13; 10:5,7), and "fearing God" and "judgment" (3:14,15,16,17; 5:1-7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 11:9; 12:1,13-14) occur throughout the book, there is yet another refrain that demands examination. This refrain is repeated six times, and it creates the most difficulty in the interpretation of the book. The occurrences are as follows:

> 2:24-25 – "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?"
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> 3:12-13 – "I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God."
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> 3:22 – "So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because this is his lot."
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> 5:18-19 – "Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God."
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> 8:15 – "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun that to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun."
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> 9:7-9 – "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun."

Notice that in each case the statements appear to be made as final conclusions. Therefore, many have concluded that the solution to life is that of the Epicurean sensualist, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!"

Now, it seems to me that something is terribly amiss with such a deduction, for this is completely different from the ultimate conclusion at the end of Ecclesiastes. And, I must confess, that I am predisposed to believe that our author knew what he was doing; at least, he knew enough not to blatantly contradict himself. Let's raise this question: Why do we

read Epicurean philosophy into this refrain? The answer is simple: because we are familiar with the Epicurean slogan. But just suppose that Solomon (to whom, traditionally, the book is attributed) was not familiar with the slogan. Could he possibly mean something that would be consistent with his ultimate conclusion? I think so.

Combining the preface and the conclusion we have: "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' . . . 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' . . . Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment . . ." The first statement (the preface) is a verdict on all life. The second statement (the conclusion) is counsel in view of the verdict. But is the verdict true? That is what Solomon examines for us, turning life over and over in his hands so that we see it from every angle. He forces us to admit that it is meaninglessness, emptiness, futility; yet, not in the sense that it is not worth living. Solomon's use of the term "meaningless" describes something vastly greater than that. All life is meaningless is this sense, it is unable to give us the key to itself. "No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it" (8:17). An "under the sun" perspective reveals only "meaninglessness." Ecclesiastes is the record of a search for the key to life. It is an endeavor to give meaning to life, to see life as a whole. But there is no key under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. "'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'" If you want the key, you must go to the locksmith who made the lock. "God holds the key of all the unknown," and He will not give it to you. "You cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things" (11:5). Since, then, you cannot get the key, you must trust the locksmith to open the doors.

Yes, life is a puzzle. This is not pessimism. It is the solemn truth—just as true today as it was in the days of Solomon. That eternal why hangs over our lives. It meets us at every turn. Why? The Nazi hordes overrun Europe. Why? Innocent lives are taken in the senseless shooting down of a civilian aircraft over Soviet airspace? Why? Crazy madmen, called terrorists, blow holes in airplanes for people to fall out of. Why? Because of seemingly avoidable mistakes, an airplane collides with a bridge and crashes. Why? South Africa wreaks with racial and tribal violence. Why? I had to pay a fortune to fill my gas tank to get here today. Why? Hundreds go hungry and live in poverty in the richest nation on the face of the earth. Why? A brilliant young Christian life is swept away, while a good-for-nothing rascal is miraculously delivered. Why? Why? Why? Where is the sense in it all? It is incredible that life should make no sense. Every person who thinks at all believes that there is sense somewhere, if only he/she could find it. They may not look far; they may settle down to an unworthy philosophy of life. Or they may plumb the depths of reason, of

science, or of theology in an endeavor to find the plan. But the plan is not to be found. The moment we think we have it, something happens that does not fit into our neat little scheme at all. But we go on looking. We must look. We cannot help it. We are made that way. "I have seen the burden God has laid on man. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:10-11).

Do you see how Solomon develops his theme? We go through the world with him, looking for the solution to life, and at every turn he forces us to admit that there is only meaninglessness, frustration, and bewilderment. Life does not provide the key to itself—not nature, not man, and not wisdom. And certainly, life does not provide the key to the greatest meaninglessness of all—death. Death can make a man hate life, not because he wants to die, but because it renders life so futile—just as a child on the seashore may grow weary of the sand castles that he/she builds so patiently only to have them swallowed up by the unyielding sea.

Concerning death, notice with me 3:18-22 (and this translation is based upon suggestions by Michael Eaton): "I also thought, 'As for men, God is making it clear to them so that they may see that they—they by themselves—are animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows the spirit of man which goes upward, and the spirit of the beast which goes down to the earth [cf. NIV note]?' [And here is our refrain.] So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot."

Mankind commonly tends to live as though there was unlimited time for fulfilling the plan of God. It is an extraordinary fact that most of us live as though this life were to be prolonged indefinitely. Or, looking at it from another point of view, we dwell upon eternal life with God and forget that the tool for the service of God now is the body, and, if we fail to serve God in the body now, we shall never be able to make up in the future for what we have failed to do now. This body, which we share with the animal world, is a frail thing; yet, it is the instrument with which we serve God. Are you and I on a higher footing than an animal with regard to physical death? This life is the gift that God has given us. Here and now we must find satisfaction and must realize ourselves. For we will not come back to this earth any more than an animal will. Let me try to say this in a way that is perhaps more stunning. You and I are not really ready to handle life until we are ready to face death. Henry David Thoreau once said: "You cannot kill time without injuring eternity."

OK. I feel the need to bring my thoughts together. If the recurring refrain that we have examined is interpreted in the light of the rest of the book, and in particular the final conclusion, then that refrain can only mean what the Christian means when he/she says, "I will take the things that make up my life—my food, my drink, my work—from the hand of God. In all things God is working for my good." And so, "a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" (2:24-25). Furthermore, God "has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God" (3:11-13). Ecclesiastes tells us that we must never lose the realization that there is a plan, and we must never begin to treat the common things of life—food and drink and work—as though they were not gifts of God.

Perhaps I can better state this point by making three observations. First, we must face the facts. Faith is not mere self-delusion nor is it a tranquilizer taken to escape from the realities of the world. A faith that will not hold up under examination is not worth having. Second, we must learn to live with what cannot be changed. After all, "the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and change happen to them all" (9:11). Third, to the qualities of honesty in facing the facts, and of courage to accept life on its own terms, Solomon adds a further and equally fundamental virtue—the capacity to find enjoyment in the experiences of everyday living. The good life makes life worth living, and the good of life is the living of it. The fruit of wisdom is not in the solution of mysteries, but in knowing how to live best under life's difficulties and uncertainties.

Let's face it. The world is not weighted in our favor. And yet, the same things which break the person of the world, can make the Christian if he/she takes them from the hand of God. We must go on looking for the key that will unify the whole of life. We must look for it: God has made us like that. But we will not find the key in the world, we will not find it in life. In revelation, we find the outskirts of God's ways. In Christ, our fingertips touch the key, but no one has closed his/her fingers on it yet. No philosophy of life can satisfy if it leaves out God. Yet, even the finest Christian philosophy doesn't have all the answers. But don't despair. There is a life to be lived day by day. And in the seemingly unrelated events of everyday life God can be served and God can be glorified. And in this daily service of God, we can find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us.

H. L. Mencken once said: "The basic fact about human experience is not that it is a tragedy, but that it is a bore. It is not that it is predominantly painful, but that it is lacking in any sense." Thoreau commented: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." These thoughts are not original. In fact, "there is nothing new under the sun."

In Judaism, the Book of Ecclesiastes was read on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The mood was one of delight as the prospects of living and enjoying all the good things of life become possible once men/women have come to honor God and keep His commandments. However, life without God soon becomes a monotonous "chasing after the wind."

There are four points I would like to make which, although they are found in the first chapter, serve to capture the major themes of the entire book. (1) "Everything is boring. It makes you so tired you don't even want to talk about it" (1:8—New Century Version). Solomon had the time, the money, and the energy to explore every dimension of life. What he found was that, from a purely earthly perspective, life is a futile "chasing after the wind" as nothing "under the sun" brings ultimate satisfaction. (2) The personal temptation to escape is always stronger than the realization of its consequences. Glen Campbell's hit song of several years ago, *Gentle On My Mind*, tells the story of a man who longs to be free. The playboy-cowboy wants a life that is uncluttered with irritating things like binding contracts and lifelong commitments. He is satisfied to stop off for a night or two, but he doesn't want anyone to hassle him with talk of a permanent relationship. He is on a search for another path, another pleasure . . . another back road that will somehow satisfy. You get the distinct impression he will never find what he's looking for. Oh how we long to "get away from it all" without realizing that whatever "new" thing we find will soon become old. (3) The sensual lure of something better tomorrow robs us of the joys offered today. The good life—the life that satisfies—exists only when we stop wanting a better one. The good life is learning to savor what is instead of continually longing for what might be. The good life comes when we step off the escalator of desire and learn to be content with what we already have. (I am not advocating mediocrity. I am advocating contentment.) (4) Satisfaction in life "under the sun" will never occur until there is a meaningful connection with the living Lord above the sun. Satisfaction and joy come when we look at what is ours and say, "This is enough! What I have will do! What I make of what I have is up to me and my vital union with God." This is precisely Solomon's conclusion centuries ago: "Now, everything has been heard. Here is my final advice: Honor God and obey His commands. This is the most important thing people can do" (12:13).

Now, I would like to be personal for just a moment. There is one thing about Ecclesiastes that gnaws at my very soul, that haunts my whole being. In 2:17-19, Solomon

painfully pronounces: "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless." Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, left everything he had accomplished, acquired, and accumulated to a fool. He left it all to his son. What a tragic story! After four decades of peace, Solomon handed over his kingdom to his son. Rehoboam took the kingdom from his father and had available to him either wise counselors or foolish ones. He could choose to listen to the seasoned men of God who would warn him or listen to the young, self-serving upstarts who cared nothing about God. You guessed it—he chose the latter. Within a brief span of time, hardly a year, the country was in civil war. Then Egypt came marching in and . . . well, the story is downhill all the way. As the father of three sons, this hits me hard right in the heart. For if I am able to pass on insights from Ecclesiastes to you but not to my sons, I believe that I have failed miserably in both the comprehension and the application of the true wisdom of God.

There is a beautiful, yet startling, story which comes out of American Indian lore. Once, an Indian brave found an egg that had been laid by an eagle. Unable to return the egg to an eagle's nest, he did the next best thing by putting it in the nest of a prairie chicken. The result was predictable. The hen sat on this eagle's egg, along with her own eggs, knowing nothing of the addition. By and by the eaglet was hatched alongside the prairie chickens.

All his life, the changeling eagle, thinking he was a prairie chicken, did what the prairie chickens did. He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. He clucked and cackled. And he flew in a brief thrashing of wings and flurry of feathers no more than a few feet off the ground. After all, that's how prairie chickens were supposed to fly.

Years passed, and the changeling eagle grew very old. One day, he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. Hanging with graceful majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

"What a beautiful bird!" said the changeling eagle to his neighbor. "What is it?"

"That's an eagle—the chief of the birds," the neighbor answered. "But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him."

So the changeling eagle never gave it another thought. And he died thinking he was a prairie chicken.

What a tragedy! God has made us—you and me—in His own image. He has made us to be eagles; however, far too often we choose to be prairie chickens. After all, we live in a world of prairie chickens: a world of digging, scratching, clucking, cackling, and thrashing

of wings. And when, one day, we catch a glimpse of the majesty of God, our world says, "Don't give it a second thought. You could never be like Him." And so each day thousands of eagles go to their graves believing that they are prairie chickens. "What fools we mortals be."

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