

SUMMER CLASSICS
WISDOM FOR LIVING:
(4) ECCLESIASTES
WISDOM AND WORLD VIEW

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3; 3:1-8

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PROLOGUE

Prince Charles once spoke of his belief that, for all the advances of science:

"There remains deep in the soul (if I dare use that word), a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing, some ingredient that makes life worth living."

SCRIPTURE

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. {2} Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. {3} What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, Professor Hugh Moorhead of Northeastern Illinois University put together a book entitled, *The Meaning of Life According to Our Century's Greatest Writers and Thinkers* (Chicago Review Press, 1988). It was based on the responses he received from some of the best-known philosophers, writers, scientists and intellectuals in the world. He had asked them to send him their answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Surprisingly, many had no answer or offered what they said was their best guess. And not a few were hoping Moorhead would write back with the answer.

Long before Moorhead wrote his book, the biblical writer known as Ecclesiastes or "the Teacher" asked the same question in a different way:

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (1:3).

In other words, does life have any value or meaning? Most of the rest of his book is a summary of the Teacher's exhaustive exploration of this question. The results have been interpreted many ways. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex debate, let me say that the interpretations tend to fall into one of two groups: 1) the first group says that Ecclesiastes is a highly pessimistic book that offers glimmers of hope; 2) the second group says that Ecclesiastes is a highly pessimistic book that offers even less hope than the first group thinks it does! (Okay, maybe this is a slight exaggeration, but I think you get the point.)

Ecclesiastes has traditionally been attributed to Solomon but he is never named within the

book. Instead the author calls himself Qoheleth (ko-HEHL-ehth). This term comes to us by way of the Greek translation as “Ecclesiastes” and is translated into English as “the Teacher” (or “the Preacher”). It refers to a speaker who addresses a particular gathering of people.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the Books of Wisdom. The purpose of Wisdom literature is to teach us how to make good choices. With some books, this is obvious. Proverbs helps us to make choices that generally lead to success in life. But the goal of Ecclesiastes is less clear.

Proverbs asks the question, “How should I live?” But Ecclesiastes asks the more disturbing question, “Why should I live?” The Teacher then leads us on a relentless journey that shocks us into seeing life and death according to the assumptions we have made about God, the world, and ourselves. Then he warns us that if our beliefs cannot withstand scrutiny, the only honest conclusion is that life is meaningless. “All is vanity” — literally, life is like the morning mist that has no form or substance and quickly fades from the heat of the day.

1. WHAT IS YOUR WORLD VIEW?

Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end (3:11 NLT).

Everyone has a world view. They may not use that terminology. They may not spend much time consciously thinking about it. But everyone has a certain point of view, a set of basic beliefs and ideas about what life is.

In chapters 1-3, the Teacher lays the foundation for two different world views using the phrases “under the sun” and “under heaven.” “Under the sun” refers to the belief that all of life consists of what we can see and feel in the here and now. There is no God, there is no eternity, or, if God and eternity do exist, they have no practical impact on this life. Today we would call this “secularism.” The word “secular” is from the Latin word for “world.” Christians are supposed to be secular in the sense that we are to be living out our faith in the world. But when we add the suffix “ism” to the word it takes on a new meaning. Secularism is the philosophy that says that this world is all there is.

“Under heaven” refers to the belief that world was created by God and for God. This also means that each and every human being is created by God. Every human being is made in the image of God. We have a purposeful origin and a purposeful destiny.

The Teacher tells us that God has placed eternity in our hearts (3:11). This gives us a capacity for something larger than ourselves but it does not give us the ability to comprehend God and his ways. As we mature in heaven we will increasingly understand the big picture. But in this world we only know a few things. J. S. Wright used to say:

“God holds the key to all unknown — but he will not give it to you. Since you

do not have the key you must trust Him to open the doors”¹

The Teacher does not spend much time on this second world view but there are enough references to it to keep the book from preaching complete despair. Otherwise we are just whistling in the dark. The Teacher spends most of his time on the “under the sun” world view as that seems to be the primary point of view of his intended audience.

There are many different world views but they can usually be placed in one of these two categories: “under the sun” or “under heaven.” If the Teacher were here he might well ask, “Which of these represents your point of view and why?” And if he did not like your answer he would then lead you on an uncomfortable journey of self-examination.

2. IS YOUR WORLD VIEW HONEST?

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart (7:2).

The Teacher tells us that it is better to spend time in the house of mourning than in the house of feasting. This is because death comes to all of us, and in many forms. Not only will we die physically, but we experience a kind of death when we lose loved ones, when our dreams die, when we are afflicted with horrible diseases, when we lose our job, and when we experience broken relationships.

Most world views try to reject or ignore the fact of suffering and death. Some try to bury it in an unbridled pursuit of pleasure. Some, like modern existentialism, seem to tell us that death itself is the goal of life and that we should embrace it in a kind of psychological suicide.

But the Teacher faces pain and suffering honestly. He is a citizen of the real world. He burns at the injustices and disappointments of life. He grieves the passing of youth and the universality of death. But he cannot abide a dishonest approach to life that tries to find ultimate meaning in the things of this world and ignores the finality of death.

In order to convince his intended audience of the futility of such an approach, he uses what is called an eristic style in which he temporarily adopts the very “under the sun” world view that he is critiquing. This is probably the major reason why many Christians get confused when reading this book. The Teacher seems to endorse ideas that are contrary to the rest of Scripture or even the book’s own ending, but in reality he is bringing these ideas to light in order to expose their inadequacies.

Assuming the point of view of “under the sun”, the Teacher tries to find ways to rise above the meaninglessness of the world. He looks for the answer in: nature, money, sensual pleasures, property, position, intelligence, philosophy, even religious observances. Now, granted, some

¹ (*Ecclesiastes*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 5).

of these pursuits are better than others but sooner or later all of these things butt heads against a huge rack of frustration that proves their emptiness or their helplessness. The Teacher is relentless in making us face the final emptiness of life, first of all because it is the truth about this passing world but secondly, because there is a bigger truth to live by:

3. DOES YOUR WORLD VIEW OFFER ANY HOPE?

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. {14} For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (12:13-14).

We need to remember that the purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes is not to promise us that life will be wonderful if we begin with God (Proverbs 1:1-7), but to warn us that life is without meaning if we begin without God (Ecc 1:2). The Teacher does not commend the light as much as he makes the darkness intolerable. If we can understand this then we can better appreciate the kind of hope that is being offered here.

The inescapable conclusion of a world view that rejects God is that life does not matter. But if there is a God who will one day judge the world then everything matters. Time, by itself, merely destroys us. But in the light of eternity nothing is meaningless, no one is forgotten. The secularist says, "Right now counts for right now!" But the believer says, "Right now counts forever."²

CONCLUSION

Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, wrote a book called *A Confession* in which he tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life. He had rejected Christianity as a child. As a young adult he looked for an alternative source of meaning. He tried unbridled pleasure, but that did not satisfy him. He sought fame and fortune, achieved both, but still could not answer the question... so what?

Then he became ambitious for his family, to give them the best possible life. He married and had thirteen children (which, he said, temporarily distracted him from any search for the overall meaning of life). He had achieved all his ambitions and was surrounded by what appeared to be complete happiness. And yet one question brought him to the verge of suicide: "Is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by my death?"

As he looked around at his contemporaries he saw that people were not facing up to the important questions of life - "Where did I come from?" "Where am I heading?" "Who am I?" "What is life about?"

²R. C. Sproul from *Tabletalk*.

Eventually Tolstoy found that the peasant people of Russia had been able to answer these questions through their faith, and he came to realize that in Jesus Christ we find the answer. He said, “To know God and to live is the same thing. God is Life.”

Meanwhile, the Teacher reminds us that we live “under heaven” and even if we don’t understand all of life, there is One who does. So he encourages us to take life each day from the hand of God, and enjoy it from him and for him.