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Living the Lessons of Ecclesiastes

BY JACK REESE

When Life is Unfair

"I don't feel like worshiping today!"

A godly woman, the wife of one of our elders, approached me about a half hour before the service. "I don't feel like worshiping," she repeated. "I just don't think we can sing a bunch of praise songs and hear a nice little sermon today. You know, I just can't pretend that it's business as usual."

I understood. In fact, I had already changed the worship for that morning. We were in too much grief to do the nice little service I had planned for that day.

We were hurting. All of us. The previous few months had been devastating. First, one of our deacons, never sick in his life, got a headache, finally went to the hospital because of its severity, then died of a brain tumor less than a month later.

One of our young mothers, with a three-week-old baby girl, developed congestive heart failure and was dead within a week.

And then one of our dear brothers accidentally backed his car over his young son. The boy's death broke all our hearts! We were hurt, sad, angry, devastated. And none of us felt like worshiping that Sunday.

As the young preacher for that church, I knew that I was unprepared. I'm not sure how anyone could have been ready for the losses we had experienced in such a short time. And that was only the public face of our pain. There were bad marriages, financial setbacks, sickness, and loneliness—almost no one in our church was unaffected. These were good folk. It all seemed unfair. And it was.

I couldn't help but reflect on the conversation I had had some time earlier with a friend from another city. He

made a strong case that good things happen in this life to people of faith. That this is the promise of God. He said that trusting God almost always means success at work, a happy home life, and a general measure of personal and familial contentment. His congregation was essentially based on that premise. And it seemed to be working—for most of the people there, anyway. Virtually everyone at his church was successful—middle class and above—nicely dressed and apparently happy. There seemed to be very few problems among them. Almost too good to be true.

Why were so many terrible things happening in my church while everything seemed to be going quite well in his? This was not just my question; it was essentially what the members of my congregation were asking me. What was the matter with us? Or, as my elder's wife asked me bluntly, "What's the matter with God?" Frankly, I wasn't sure of the answer. The whole thing was confusing, an enigma to me.

It is largely out of that crisis in my ministry that I have been thrown back upon the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. I had studied it in graduate school, but somehow its questions and problems did not become real until that Sunday morning when that dear, sweet, godly, angry woman confronted me: "I don't feel like worshiping today!"

Two Voices of Wisdom

For me, wisdom literature has always been difficult to understand and, certainly, to preach or teach. In large measure this is because the literature seems to function in contrasting ways.

One type of wisdom, for example, presents a divinely directed moral order under which the wise and good receive reward and the foolish and wicked bring upon themselves ruin. This pattern is reflected in many of the historical narratives of the Old Testament, like the stories of Saul and David. The misery and ultimate death of King Saul is because of his sin. David ascends to the throne because he is a man after God's own heart. But he loses a

should go lives uprightly. But to so suggest is not to undermine the place and importance of wisdom literature, for the truths to which it points are in the ordered mind of God, and its instruction is highly valued by anyone who is truly wise.

But there is another kind of wisdom, one that is more disturbing and that, on the surface of things, seems to run against the divinely directed moral order described above.

How can these be divine words? They seem more the words of a fatalist, a skeptic, one who has played and lost and has few words of encouragement for anyone still in the game.



son in childbirth because of his adultery with Bathsheba. These stories in many ways put flesh and blood to the moral lessons presented in wisdom literature. Certain attitudes and behaviors lead to ruin; others lead to life and relative success. This so-called Deuteronomistic wisdom finds its clearest voice in the book of Proverbs:¹

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. (10:4)

The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out. (10:9)

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. (11:25)

He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich. (21:17)

However misunderstood, these passages gave my prosperous friend confidence in his view that wealth and success are blessings bestowed by God upon people of wisdom and faith and that bad things happen to people who have not been so wise or faithful.

Such a straightforward rendering of these texts misunderstands the nature of this kind of wisdom and its modest claims. In the words of R. B. Y. Scott, "Wisdom

In this wisdom, the sense that our life circumstances are a reflection of our character and behavior is hopelessly naive. Life is often unfair. Suffering is unrelated to sin, and fine living is unrelated to righteousness. This is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

It was Ecclesiastes that was the mirror held in my face during the time of our congregational crisis. It was the angel against whom I fought and who left me limping again and again as I tried to wrench out of him the answers:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (1:2)

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (1:14)

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. (2:22-23)

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. (3:19)



And yet I have found that these blistering, painfully honest words from the Teacher in this inspired, ancient text have strangely provided me solace, purpose, and hope.

was . . . the disciplined intelligence and integrity of men who sought to understand what they had observed and experienced, and to persuade others of the truth they saw."² This wisdom comes from observation and common sense. It sees the trends, the ways life typically goes under different kinds of circumstances, and how things usually work out for us. It is not prophecy—not every foolish man ends up poor; not every son trained in the way he

How can these be divine words? They seem more the words of a fatalist, a skeptic, one who has played and lost and has few words of encouragement for anyone still in the game. And yet I have found that these blistering, painfully honest words from the Teacher in this inspired, ancient text have strangely provided me solace, purpose, and hope.

Touchpoints

Perhaps to get a sense of this book, it would be helpful to mention several touchpoints that can provide, if not understanding, at least some direction in grasping its essence.³

1. Determining why the Teacher believes that life is meaningless would help us understand the meaning of Ecclesiastes, but no clear-cut answer exists. This word (Hebrew *hebel*) is used no less than thirty-eight times in the book. It is variously translated “vapor,” “breath,” “wind,” “meaninglessness,” “emptiness,” “futility,” and “vanity.” In 2:10–11 pleasure is *hebel*. In 2:18–23, 3:9, and 6:7–9 work and its fruits are *hebel*. Riches are *hebel* (5:9–16; 6:1–6), as is wisdom itself (7:23–24). Why then should I be wise? Graham Ogden⁴ suggests that *hebel* here indicates not futility or meaninglessness but that life is an enigma. How can the wise die like fools (2:16–17)? It is an enigma. How can a person die before justice is worked out (3:16–19)? That is not an indication of futility. It doesn’t emasculate life of its meaning. Rather, it is an enigma. As we shall see, it is not for humans to know.

2. Life is to be enjoyed while it can be. Ecclesiastes is not a dour book but one in which the Teacher seeks enjoyment where and when he can, under certain limitations. “I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live,” he says (3:12).



Whatever else in this book may be unclear, this message is unmistakable: you don’t know enough to rely on yourself; you’d better put your trust in God.

“There is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work . . .” (3:22 NRSV). But even here there is somewhat of an edge—“nothing better” is not exactly an enthusiastic endorsement. Nevertheless, where enjoyment can be found, find it.

3. The Teacher at times seems to reject traditional forms of wisdom. For example, rather than exalting age and warning about the follies of youth, he suggests enjoying the younger years while you can, because the later ones will be full of misery (11:9–12:8). While much in this life is an enigma, cannot be known, the Teacher also says that some things can be known so that a wise person can profit from them. In ways reminiscent of traditional wisdom, he says, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God,” and be careful what you say there, especially if you are making a vow (5:1–7). This is wise, practical, specific advice, not merely an example of meaningless or enigmatic things. Or consider these examples, which could very well have come from Proverbs:

The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. (9:17)

Words from a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. (10:12)

Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. (11:4)

Yet even here, these wise sayings are peppered with warnings about the futility of knowing and the enigmas of life (e.g., 9:11; 10:6; 11:5).

4. However much of life may appear meaningless, one thing is sure: a person should fear God. Many people who have only cursory knowledge of Ecclesiastes can quote from its famous closing verses (12:13–14), “. . . Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. . . .” Many scholars have disputed whether these verses are original, because that message seems out of sync with the rest of the book. However, the notion of fearing God can be found in scattered places throughout:

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.

God does it so that men will revere him. (3:14)

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. . . .

Much dreaming and many words are meaningless.

Therefore stand in awe of God. (5:4, 7)

Whatever else in this book may be unclear, this message is unmistakable: you don’t know enough to rely on yourself; you’d better put your trust in God. But even then, the message is complex. In this regard, Roland Murphy quotes from Old Testament theologian Walter Zimmerli:

Fear of God [in Ecclesiastes] is not travelling in paths of light which secure for those who walk therein the harvest of life’s fruits and honors. Fear of God here means walking under a heaven that is mysteriously closed, walking without the assurance that lightening might not suddenly shoot out and strike you as you go—at every step relying upon the free gift of God, but with every step also summoned to suffer the riddle and oppression that God can inflict.⁵

5. There is no accounting for the earthly treatment of the just and the wicked. Justice cannot be found. The wicked may prosper while the righteous catch it in the

neck. Evil thrives because there is no penalty to be paid (8:11). Justice cannot be meted out when there is no retribution for evil. Nevertheless, the Teacher says, God will judge both the righteous and the wicked:

Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account. . . . God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked. . . . (3:15–17)
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. (11:9)

The Teacher assumes that God's justice will win out in the long run but knows it will not occur here and now. Yet he has a measure of confidence that whatever happens in this life, whatever tragedies, however unfair life is, ultimately (and, for the Teacher, vaguely), God will bring about justice.

6. In the face of our questions, in the midst of the unfairness of life, the most appropriate human response is silence. It is to say nothing, because nothing can be said. Because here and now nothing can be known. The Teacher calls his readers to quiet living rather than chasing after work (4:4–6). He urges those who go to the house of God not to be quick with their words (5:1–2). He reminds them that listening is better than sacrifices offered by fools (5:1; see also 9:17). Humble and quiet living is often the only response to the exigencies of living in this world. Similarly, the Teacher calls his listeners to live simply. He urges them to be willing to accept less, knowing that the common laborer sleeps better than the wealthy (5:8–12)! He compels them to straightforward living rather than the devising of many schemes (7:29). Anything else is only a chasing after futility.

7. The Teacher never flinches from holding God responsible for what occurs here. He does not blame the injustices of this world on Satan but allows God to accept both responsibility and blame. God is the one who gives everything in its time, not only life but also death (3:1–3). He gives duration/time/eternity to humans (3:11) but does so to keep us from understanding what he is up to. He is the author of wisdom and knowledge, of wealth as well as poverty. And what he gives, he also takes away. God is responsible for what is here, what we experience.

8. Finally, the thread that weaves through the entire book is God's inscrutable nature. When all is said and done, we cannot know the ways of God. While we may find patterns and tendencies, applying our common sense to life situations, knowing that some behaviors are wiser than others, we cannot know the mind of God. We cannot

see past the haze to see him face to face. Some things we cannot know. (Perhaps the key verses of the entire book are 8:16–17):

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. 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.

The impact of this book is at times overpowering. In the face of our circumstances, whether they produce exultation or tears, all that we can do is stand back in fear and fall down in utter humility before God. He has allowed us to participate in a measure of wisdom, those things that the orderly human mind can determine. And in this, Ecclesiastes does not veer far from traditional wisdom. Some things can be seen and known; some behaviors are more responsible than others. But in the ultimate picture, God's wisdom is beyond our wisdom. We simply cannot know. The height of human arrogance is to think we know or claim we know. Ecclesiastes drives us to our knees. There is nothing we can do but fear God.

Looking at Ourselves

No one should assume that scripture's whole word to our fragile and apparently unjust human condition can be found here. A Christian cannot help but recognize that this book does not reflect the response of God to human sin through the death of his own Son. There is no indication of God's in-breaking generosity, no understanding that grows out of New Testament incarnational theology. There is no developed eschatology here that may help place our human struggles within a larger framework of the actions of God. Scripture has many words to speak as we find ourselves facing the inexplicable. But these words from Ecclesiastes have integrity and power. The Teacher speaks the truth, and his message should not be easily discarded as irrelevant or incomprehensible. His words help provide ballast for a vessel that seems ready to capsize. And through them—these stark, pointed, evocative words—God still speaks to his church.

Ecclesiastes, perhaps more than any other book, helped our congregation make it through its ordeal of suffering. It gave us confidence to ask the questions of God without fearing repercussion from him, to ask why, knowing that God was big enough to accept responsibility for what had happened, without assuming that he had somehow maneuvered the situation to teach us specific

moral lessons. It caused us to stop and listen, to be quiet. It pushed us to not be driven in our work but to find satisfaction in simple activities. It challenged us to not place too much stock in what we did or who we were because all of it, in a moment, could be snuffed out. It allowed us to live with the enigma, the apparent meaninglessness and injustice of our suffering, without having to understand why.

And ultimately, it forced us to our knees. We came to know that we were not in control, that we could not manage these situations in our favor. We saw clearly the fallacies of my friend who assumed that faithful living would be rewarded with earthly success—in his own life and in his church's. Our tragedies were not the result of our faithlessness but were allowed by God for inexplicable reasons. But we had no other choice, no other hope, than to place our confidence in him, to rest on his ultimate sense of justice, to trust in the final vindication of the righteous in his day, in his way.

This tale has no happy ending, but that comes as no surprise for anyone who has been instructed by the Teacher. Through the tragedies faced by our church, some

people lost their faith, some lives were never healed. I am still not prepared to minister well to a church that is faced with such a level of public pain, nor, I think, is anyone else. Not really. But many of us who lived through that dark time have found a kind of contentment. Not a confidence that comes from knowing but a contentment that comes from depending upon someone else to know. And in his hands we will attempt to live with a measure of joy and purpose and faith.

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New International Version (NIV).

² R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 22.

³ Among other sources, Roland Murphy's *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) has been especially helpful at this point.

⁴ Graham Ogden, *Bible Translator* 38 (1987).

⁵ Walter Zimmerli, quoted in Murphy.