

## **Ecclesiastes: A book of Joy**

I maintain that the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament is, in fact, a book of Joy. Most people look at the book as a morose book which describes bitterness and misery found in the search for fulfillment in life. It parallels the existential meandering of, from the viewpoint of Jean Paul Sartre, an absurd life which is totally devoid of any satisfactory and meaningful focal point. It opens with an embittered statement about the futility of existence in a world where there is no value found even in the work which a man does.[1] This meaninglessness is seemingly even carried on through the futility of the natural cycles of life[2]. They seem to be pointless and absurd because they appear to be without purpose or fulfillment. However, modern thought realizes that these cycles are, in fact, the very hallmark of fulfillment.

The cycles of life are God's way of keeping everything flowing in its properly designed course of events. Ecologists deplore the "use it once then throw it away" mentality which serves only to build up rubbish piles and bury the users in their own garbage. From the cycle of water to the circulation of the earth's winds on the planet upon which we live, we can give thanks that "...the sea is not full"[3]. The air and water circulation is one area where in we can express our sincere praise to God that our planet is an exciting, dynamic, and inhabitable place to live. It would not be so were it not for the cycles of nature.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:23 expresses the disillusionment with the quest for wisdom, wealth, materialism, and pleasure. These quests are a self centered endeavor. The only one who really can gain any semblance of benefit from a pursuit of these items is the pursuer. However, any knowledge gained from a pursuit of wisdom for its own sake is in fact grievous and painful[4]. Here we can give glory and praise to God who created the world thus. Knowledge is much like a lake of fresh water; it must flow out as well as in. The appropriately named Dead Sea in Israel is only a recipient of inflow....Fresh water lakes which receive fresh water at one end, and give out fresh water at the other end are aquatic sanctuaries for living organisms and "neat stuff" like frogs, fish, and other ecological contributors to God's plan of life. Knowledge flowing out through using talents and abilities to aid and assist others keeps the "lake" of your mind fresh and lush and supple. Merely acquiring knowledge for its own sake is vainglorious, and causes your mind and soul to stagnate like the Dead Sea's waters. Using it for God's glory keeps mind and soul fresh like a fresh water lake and alive for Him.

The same holds true for self-glorification projects and other areas wherein we place ourselves in the "spotlight of worship" rather than God who said we are to put Him first above all others[5]. The world leads us down the wrong path only if we choose to be lead there. Since the world belongs to Satan[6], it only stands to reason, that, when we are seeking to please self and thus become a friend of the world, we then enter into an adversarial relationship with God[7]. While this is pleasing to our secular senses, it follows from the previous argument, that, though we may find transient bliss and momentary pleasure, our deep inner essences are still in want of something. Acts of oppression, work, political success, false worship and hoarded riches are all futile efforts to bring about meaning where the world would have us believe no meaning exists[8]. At this point, we come to find ourselves much like Jean Paul Sartre's absurd man in a meaningless world without focus, purpose, or ability to change anything for our favor[9]. We are most to be pitied because we have taken stock only in the things of this world, and not come to realize the joys of the salvation which is ours through Christ, even though we are sinners[10]. We may find ourselves much like the Sadducees who only acknowledge the here and now[11]. No wonder Solomon was ready to give up in fatalistic resignation. He simply had not yet seen "the light". The word here to take note of is "yet".

Solomon had gotten to the point in his life where he had everything the world could offer. His worldly assets, however, had failed him in his attempt to find the meaning of life. He begins to acknowledge the fact that men have corrupted themselves by pursuit of wanton pleasures while God has created men upright[12]. The final incongruity of life comes clear in that in the end the same fate awaits all men; death[13].

We are thus advised to enjoy life as best as we can, seeking wisdom over strength[14].

Life, indeed, has its uncertainties and brings with it the challenges which face us all. Whether rich or poor, wise or foolish, royal or peasant we all must at one time or another come to terms with the question of where do we belong in the all over scheme of life. We each arrive at this question in different ways. Solomon began his search with an arsenal of assets most of us are not privileged to have, yet so far in the book of Ecclesiastes his search has been in vain and he is left a bitter and jaundiced man by the futility of his search thus far. This is reminiscent of the search for the meaning of life which many, even I myself, have experienced. Many of us have searched for God in places where, because of His Holy Essence, He would not be found. In fact, He would even find such places odious. The lifestyle represented in such places was not congruent with a life of spirituality with God.

Finally, however, God has allowed Solomon to begin to get a glimmer of what he has been looking for throughout his life. He finally realizes, through God's grace, that remembering your creator when you are still young will prevent a lifetime of vain search, futile attempts to get meaning from life, and much need for repentance[15]. The final irony is that in the end, Solomon discovers he was on the right track in the beginning of his life, when he was a follower of God and was in His grace. The Joy comes because God was NOT found in all the places Solomon searched....would you want a God who WAS found there? The joy is that God is found in the sincerity of your heart, not in the wealth and power of the searcher. The joy is that Solomon came to terms with the meaning of life in the last 2 verses. Remember joy is what comes from within and exudes out; happiness is what tries to soak in from the outside. Solomon had been confusing happiness and joy. The Joy for him is that he finally learned the difference. We can learn from his mistakes as we identify with Solomon in this Book. Our walk through the Book of Ecclesiastes gives us a learning experience and saves us the agony of having to physically experience the pain and suffering. Is that not a true joy for us? We can read this book and praise our Lord for His mercy and guidance.

From the beginning to the end in the Bible we are brought into the flow of life through God's perfect plan. Remember in Genesis how it was the tree of life from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to pick or eat[16]. Now in Revelation it is the tree of life from which the faithful are encouraged to eat[17]. The cycle originally condemned by Solomon as vanity and striving after wind is now a full circle praise of God's Holy Plan of life. We see throughout the scriptures the fulfillment of God's plan for life. We may not fully understand this plan, but the fact that it is being fulfilled is tantamount to a full praise and glorification of His Holy Name and Holy Plan for us. We should echo the words of the apostle Paul as he said "rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice"[18].

We see God's work going on in every facet of life's inter woven complexities. This should bring Glory to His name as we fall down on our faces and give Him praise for His Holiness in that He is not impressed by the things which impress man the most.

What the book of Ecclesiastes is saying is nothing short of a praise of God's spirit. We are told that God is different from us in ways we don't understand. Consequently we feel that there is something wrong with the message, rather than our interpretation of it. Since we are all sinners[19], and fall under the condemnation of the death sentence for our sins[20], I would guess that the evidence would point to a flaw in the interpretation. We, in this country have been brought up to believe that success is measured by money, prestige, power, and intelligence. Ecclesiastes points out the flaw in our logic. Thus we say it is a morose book because it steps on our toes. We are not prepared to search with our soul and spirit rather than with our intellect and senses. We seek happiness while God would have us accept His joy. He would have us seek the joy of His salvation[21]; remembering that joy wells up from within as the result of the salvation we have.

Although he started off with a good relationship with God, Solomon may have temporarily lost track of this. That is what explains his attitude in the earlier section of the book. I believe that he may have at least again come to terms with it in the end of the book when he speaks of the meaning of life being to "fear God and keep His commandments"; because He will bring every act into judgment[22]. This is yet another cycle. Fortunately Solomon seems to be cycling back to his original relationship with God. The first step is, of course, in realizing that he has been wrong. The joy here is that he has discovered that in time to change back.

- [1] Ecclesiastes 1:1-3
- [2] Ecclesiastes 1:4-11
- [3] Ecclesiastes 1:7
- [4] Ecclesiastes 1:18
- [5] Exodus 20:1-3
- [6] John 3:19; 1st John 5:19
- [7] James 4:4
- [8] Ecclesiastes Chapters 4&5
- [9] Sartre, Jean Paul : Being and Nothingness
- [10] 1 Corinthians 15: 12-19; Romans 3:23, 6:23
- [11] Acts 23: 8, Matthew 22: 23-33
- [12] Ecclesiastes 7:29
- [13] Ecclesiastes 8: 2-6
- [14] Ecclesiastes 8:6-18
- [15] Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8
- [16] Genesis 2: 9-3: 7
- [17] Revelation 22:2
- [18] Philippians 4:4
- [19] Romans 3:23
- [20] Romans 6:23
- [21] Psalm 51: 12
- [22] Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14