

11. Dead Flies and Snake Charmers: More Life under the Sun

Biblical material: Ecclesiastes 10.

Quotes

- Time is a companion that goes with us on a journey. It reminds us to cherish each moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we have lived. *Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Star Trek: Generations*
- The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.
Elie Wiesel
- What's it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live? *Alfie: Hal David/Burt Bacharach*

Questions

So what do dead flies and snake charmers have to do with us? What kind of insights can we find in what are often debated interpretations of the text? How can a review of these old proverbial sayings be of use today? What do they tell us about our experience, and about God? Most of all, how does all this fit into our great controversy view of our world and the universe?

Discussion

Solomon continues with his proverbial observations on life. Wednesday's lesson notes, "These are difficult texts; many commentators see different things in them....Verse 8 seems to be talking about... Though the exact meaning of verse 9 is debated, Solomon simply could be saying..." How come we don't know what the Bible is saying? How is it that the Lord could not make it clearer? Are there lessons for us here, not only in content, but in the way we approach Scripture?

So what do these old proverbs have to say to us today? The chapter does not even mention God. But that is not to say that these words are irrelevant. They describe life, and we lose nothing by examining others perspectives. In fact, in order to communicate and understand others, it is essential to look at different life philosophies. Here in Ecclesiastes 10 we have windows into the way different people think.

So, for example, verse 9 is obviously the perspective of an executive working for OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). Verse 3 brings the response from the NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) representative that 4,881 pedestrians in the US were killed by motor vehicles in 2005. Verse 1 is authenticated by perfume manufacturers that dead flies do give off a foul-smelling chemical that spoils the whole point of a perfume. Snake charmers (verse 11) could not be contacted to discover whether being bitten by a snake before it was charmed was that deleterious to health...

It would be easy to become rather dismissive of some of the more obvious comments. Some do fall into the category of "truisms," to be sure. Yet as we study further, we find aspects of interest as we see in the small things of life the continuing story of the great controversy.

While the thought pattern is fragmented, two main themes emerge. One is the often-repeated observation that life is perplexing and paradoxical—some may even say ironic and

absurd! The other major theme is the acquiring of wisdom—thinking and acting wisely. To help in this Solomon provides counsel and advice, while still admitting that because of the problems associated with this life, even following the best advice will not necessarily lead to a long and happy life.

What Solomon condemns is foolishness—not surprising, perhaps, in view of his misspent years. Surely he regrets the wasting of his time in activities that brought no lasting benefit, time that could never be recovered again. Consequently his insistent emphasis is to avoid such “folly.” While the specifics relate to his own time, this principle is universal. In order not to be foolish, we need to think and then make wise decisions based on good conclusions.

Verses 5-7 seem to imply that Solomon is complaining about changes to a class system! Is he simply being reactionary, and denying the opportunity for social advancement? What is he trying to say here? Perhaps it is more a comment on the perversity of life, and the foolishness of capricious kings and rulers in giving positions to those they wish, not because of merit, but just on the basis of some personal whim.

Comment

How is one to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s culture but within oneself? If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light. *Barry Lopez*

Ellen White Comments

The first great lesson in all education is to know and understand the will of God. Take the knowledge of God with you through every day of life. Let it absorb the mind and the whole being. God gave Solomon wisdom, but this God-given wisdom was perverted when he turned from God to obtain wisdom from other sources. We need the wisdom of Solomon after we have learned the wisdom of One greater than Solomon. We are not to go through human wisdom, which is termed foolishness, to seek true wisdom. {FE 414}

The great storehouse of truth is the word of God—the written word, the book of nature, and the book of experience in God’s dealing with human life. Here are the treasures from which Christ’s workers are to draw. In the search after truth they are to depend upon God, not upon human intelligences, the great men whose wisdom is foolishness with God. Through His own appointed channels the Lord will impart a knowledge of Himself to every seeker. {COL 125}

In gratitude Solomon acknowledged the power and the loving-kindness of the One who is “higher than the highest” (Ecclesiastes 5:8); in penitence he began to retrace his steps toward the exalted plane of purity and holiness from whence he had fallen so far. He could never hope to escape the blasting results of sin, he could never free his mind from all remembrance of the self-indulgent course he had been pursuing, but he would endeavor earnestly to dissuade others from following after folly. He would humbly confess the error of his ways and lift his voice in warning lest others be lost irretrievably because of the influences for evil he had been setting in operation. {PK 78}

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