

5. More Life Under the Sun

Biblical material: Ecclesiastes 4.

Quotes

- Most people don't like to think. This is why human religions are so popular. It almost doesn't matter what the belief system is, as long as it's firm, consistent, clear in its expectation of the follower, and rigid. Given those characteristics, you can find people who believe in almost anything. It's God's way, they say. God's word. And there are those who will accept that. Gladly. Because, you see, it eliminates the need to think.
God "Conversations with God (Book 1)" through Neale Donald Walsch
- God does not require your belief to exist. *Duane Alan Hahn*
- Small amounts of philosophy lead to atheism, but larger amounts bring us back to God.
Francis Bacon

Questions

So what is the point here? Just more complaints about meaninglessness? Or is there deeper points here? How do we apply such lessons to ourselves? How do we avoid falling into the "Solomon trap"? Is it just "more life under the sun," or are we "better dead," or "never had been," as Solomon concludes? What's the answer—without being pretentiously pious?

Discussion

Once again we see how relevant Solomon's words are for our time. He looks around and sees oppression and the lack of justice, at materialistic and competitive lifestyles, at the pointlessness of striving for wealth and possessions. He identifies the source of ambition as competition with your neighbor. He recognizes mutual help, but it too does not provide fundamental reassurance of a life of value and purpose. And in the end, what? Others come after you, and all your work is in vain...

We see Solomon's painful self-assessment when he concludes, "Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning." (Eccl. 4:13 NIV). His bitter regret comes through, as he looks back on his life experience of self-centeredness. He discovers, as is so common, that living for yourself brings no lasting satisfaction or contentment. He recognizes that a life lived for oneself is pointless, and that we are made to help one another. But even here there are dangers, for simple social involvement without meaning and without God cannot take us to where we need to be.

We may want to say "yes, but" many times in this passage. Solomon seems to be very ambivalent, speaking of the pointlessness of it all, yet still recognizing the importance of virtues and values. For these only make sense in a divine-human context, as we make sense of what we see around us by finding assurance in eternal and absolute truth. Solomon's recognition of the pointlessness of life without meaning and purpose has been repeated enough that nobody could miss it! Yet we all try to live our lives in such a way, to some degree. We are indeed selfish beings, and while we may agree with the principles here, our lives say otherwise, and too often we are with Solomon...

Comment

It was unusual to have months of snow and ice covering the ground in southern England. But not wishing to let such an opportunity slip by, that winter I began my greatest construction program ever. The ground at the back of our house sloped up the hill. Right beside the house, on the northern side, was a steeper bank, separated from the house wall by a narrow ditch. It was there that the dream became reality. Hour after freezing hour I would stand in that ditch, crafting an ice village on the side of that bank.

First a one-lane road wound its way along the bank, circuitously avoiding humps of snow and the crevasses of the glacier down by the drain. That was hard enough, pounding away at ice as hard as rock to make something like a flat surface that toy cars could drive along. After many hours of back-breaking work, I discovered that warm water could do the job much easier and produce some interesting shapes as I smoothed the road while it re-froze. Developing my use of technology, I made rapid progress using mother's hair drier attached to an extension cord until she objected (rather unreasonably, I thought) to its somewhat unorthodox use.

Once the roadway was in (complete with a terrifying section more like a bobsled run), I turned to architecture. The first few houses were hardly recognizable, being more like some accumulation of small snowballs. But as I developed my technique, something more like human habitations took shape. Then office blocks. The skyscraper attempt ended in ignominious failure, and required some heavy repair work to the residential area it had crashed down on. I even attempted a church, and with the newly-discovered process of spraying the construction with water from mom's flower mister, it even held together, though the spire was decidedly skewed.

Eventually, after what must have been hundreds of hours of work in the fearsome cold, the village covered the whole length of the bank. I began to lay plans to extend my village up the slope above. Soon I would create a huge metropolis, a whole ice-planet maybe! But that very morning, my great schemes turned to dust. Or more correctly, sludge. The temperature rose, and I watched in anguished horror as all my labor melted before my eyes. All gone, swept away.

I could hardly speak. I dragged my mother outside and just pointed. Where there had once stood a proud ice village was just the old familiar grass bank. And if I'd known the words, I would have quoted Solomon about everything being vanity and no profit for any work under the sun (which by now had come out and was melting all the snow away). All gone. And not even a picture for the record. Only what is left in memories... A hard lesson on the lack of permanence in this life. All that work—for what? At this time of loss I saw with crystal vision that all is temporary here. Just like my ice village, all melts, fades, dies. We search for the permanent in a world that does not know the word. So where is permanence?

Ellen White Comments

Be not deceived by the temporary things of this life. Consider the things of eternal interest. I want a closer connection with God. {RH, December 21, 1886}

So few are willing to look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. Many do not consider that the things which are unseen are eternal, while the things which are seen are temporary and transitory. Those who would become Christlike must keep before the mind in vivid imagery, Christ, the great center of attraction. {YI, October 28, 1897}

By his own bitter experience, Solomon learned the emptiness of a life that seeks in earthly things its highest good. {Ed 153}

Philosophical speculation and scientific research in which God is not acknowledged are making skeptics of thousands.... Skepticism is attractive to the human mind. {MH 439}

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