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Ecclesiastes - Some Challenging Passages

By Rev. Peter Eng

3:11b Life after Death

When Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, God had not yet revealed many things about life after death that we know today from revelation subsequent to the writing of Ecclesiastes. Nevertheless, it is still true that there are so many questions we can ask about eternity of which we have either no capacity to understand, or which God chooses not to reveal. The Bible is God's complete revelation to us. While the Bible was being written, it *was* progressive. That is to say, believers of a later time knew more than those of an earlier era. This does not mean that the latter day believers are better, it means no more than what is said, they *know* more.

There is no pride involved to say that we know more about life after death than did Solomon. Yet, we can also see that he made good use of what he did know. Conversely, we may not make use of what we do know. It is also precisely he knew so little about life after death that he set out to address the issue in Ecclesiastes: "How to enjoy life in this present existence."

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 Destiny of Man and Beast

Some may trip over this passage in that Solomon seems to be saying there is no

difference between what happens to a man versus an animal when they both die. This has led many to say that Solomon did not know about life after death. That is not possible because Job, which was written before Ecclesiastes, asserted that there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead (Job 19:25-27).

One explanation is that Solomon was discussing strictly the issue of how life is to be enjoyed while on this earth. In that sense, he drew a starting and ending point in his discourses. At that time, they knew of the bodily resurrection, but did not know what would happen between death and resurrection, hence the question, "Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

In addition to the partial knowledge on life after death, the meaning of this passage can be better understood if we look upon these statements as a series of reasonings:

What the Teacher saw as a reality (3:16)

"And I saw something else under the sun" speaks of the reality of injustice on earth.

Where the Teacher found comfort (3:17)

"I thought in my heart...." God is the ultimate arbiter.

What the Teacher found to be a real test of his faith due to his ignorance (3:18-21)

"I also thought, 'As for men, God tests them...' The frustration of limited knowledge offset against the comfort that God is the ultimate arbiter.

What the Teacher concluded (3:22)

"So I saw..." How to enjoy life despite the unknown (of what exactly happens after death), and on the basis of what he does know (that God will judge).

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 is the section where the Teacher plays the devil's advocate. He anticipates the objections of his readers by raising them, but they are not his own point of view.

The objections:

1. Man is no different from animals because we all die, therefore, man has no advantage over animals.
2. All decompose and become dust.
3. How can we know for sure that the spirit of man lives after him and goes to God?

The response:

1. Empirically, we cannot bring a person back from the dead to tell us.
2. But when we have faith in the justice of God, that he will judge in some way best known only to himself, we can still enjoy our lot on earth.

Ecclesiastes 4:1

No Comforter

In the context of the passage, we have to see that "no comforter" refers to human comforters, for later, we see that the oppressed can also have tranquility. In the OT period, they do not have the abiding presence or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When Christ ascended into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit, who is also called the Comforter, to be with us and in us. We stand in a very privileged position. On top of the comfort that we can have in accepting the sovereign control and ultimate justice of God (3:1-17), we have the additional strength and comfort from the presence of God.

Ecclesiastes 7:7

Who is the subject?

This verse is more literally rendered in the NASB which reads:

For oppression makes a wise man mad,
And a bribe corrupts the heart.

I see no reason why "oppression" (literal) should be changed to "extortion" in the NIV.

These two clauses do not give us the subject, which is critical in understanding this verse. That is, who is the one oppressing, and who is the one bribing? I wish to suggest that we should not change the reference for the two clauses since they are so closely paralleled. This is to say, are the readers warned against oppressing and bribing others? Or are the readers warned against yielding to oppression and bribery?

I favor the understanding that the readers are the one acted upon by the oppressor and the one who bribes. This is because one would expect harsher words if the readers were being rebuked for such reprehensible actions. The relatively mild tone indicates a warning against taking the

easiest option out of a problem because while it gets us out of a problem, it does permanent damage to us.

Ecclesiastes 7:16 Overrighteous

The first reaction of many is to pretend that this verse does not exist or that it belongs to Solomon's less enlightened moments. That is surely not so. The Teacher here gives realities in life, and is not playing the devil's advocate at this point.

There are two ways to understand this verse. The first is to take it to refer to legalism, and the second is to understand it as a person who is so rigorous in his application of what is right that life becomes impossible. He is right, but he is harsh on himself and others and that makes him the target of those he criticized.

The understanding that this refers to legalism is easily understood and is plausible. But it does not fit every well in the comparison. We are told not to be overwicked, assuming that the wickedness is real. If we are told not to be overrighteous, it appears better to understand that righteous is real righteousness.

The difficulty with saying that overrighteousness means true righteousness harshly applied is that many actually think overrighteousness is the ideal in our faith. Let us remember that God is aware of our wicked world, and of the evil in us. He actually "closes one eye" under certain circumstances because if he were to reveal all his righteousnesses to us, we cannot take it (cf. Matt 19:7-9). For us to say that God does not exact a harsh application of righteousness is not a concession to compromise righteousness, but instruction that though we see right from wrong, we do not have a mandate to right every wrong. The person who tries to do so may self-destruct.

Ecclesiastes 7:18 NIV Translation

The NIV translation: "The man who fears God will avoid them both" is idiomatic. The more literal rendition will be: "the man who fears God will follow them both" (NIV margin) or ""the one who fears God comes forth with both of them" (NASB). I am of the opinion that the NIV text reading is a good dynamic equivalence of the Hebrew meaning. The idea of the text has more to do with avoiding the two extremes rather than holding onto the two extremes.

Ecclesiastes 7:27-28 Women

The NIV reading for these two verses seem to be particularly difficult. Apart from the point that such a reading is likely to bring the full weight of women's wrath on the Teacher, there seems to be a better translation. How this verse ought to be interpreted is quite unrelated to how we may be opposed to the sentiment expressed in the NIV reading. Our first concern is to ascertain what the Teacher is saying before we ask how we are to relate to what he says.

First, we need to note that the theme in the passage describes the Teacher's search for wisdom and understanding. Next we note that the word "upright" in the NIV is supplied. In a sense, unless something is supplied, the sentence is incomplete. We see that the object of his search has to be first deduced from the passage and supplied into the text. They have chosen "upright" to blend with 7:29. I offer the opinion that it is better to read the theme of the passage as the object rather than uprightness, because the Teacher has not reached this subject in his discussion (appears only in 7:29).

The thought of this verse, if one were to take the theme as the controlling element, would be: "I found one man among a

thousand [who investigate and search out wisdom and the scheme of things]" (7:25). The issue is the one who searches for understanding rather than the one who is upright.

Third, we note that the literal rendition of the clause about women is: "but not one woman among *all these*." The term "all these" should not be changed to "them all." This is because "all these" should be the same denominator as the clause referring to men, that is, a thousand.

Fourth, we need to recognize that the Teacher was not making a categorical statement, but was describing his search. He is responsible to say what he found or did not find in his search, which was inductive. And he had earlier explained the limitations of inductive study.

Fifth, what the Teacher said is true because women then had less opportunity to pursue wisdom; being tied down to family duties. This does not reflect badly on women, only that they had no opportunity, hence, little understanding.

I wish to adapt the NASB reading for these two verses to reflect what I think is a closer understanding of the Hebrew text:

"Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation, which I am still seeking but have not found."

"I have found one man among a thousand [who seek or have understanding] but I have not found a woman among all these [who seek or have understanding]."

Ecclesiastes 10:8

Dig a Pit

The NASB and the NIV use the subjunctive mood, that is, the mood which is conveyed when "may" is used. This mood conveys

possibility rather than reality. The KJV uses "shall" which indicates a logical or a necessary result of a particular action. The KJV rendering of this text is similar to the thought in Psalm 57:6, and the English proverb, "He who digs a pit shall fall into it." It is a statement of warning that if we should try to ensnare another, we may be the victim of our own schemes. This is the thought behind pit digging in Psalm 57:6, but does not appear to be so here.

Hebrew grammar allows for either understanding. The context seems to favor the reading in NIV and NASB. This is because the passage warns against the things that can rob us of joy and delight in our work.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.