

Grace for the Day

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Ecclesiastes – Devotional (Day 8 – 14)

By Rev. Peter Eng

Day 8

Within Limits

Ecclesiastes 3:11b-15

"God does it so that men will revere him."

The fear of the LORD, is an idea that seems outmoded. The word translated "revere" by the NIV is the normal word for "fear." The Bible is replete with teachings on "the fear of the LORD." We are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We are told we are to fear the Lord and to please him. With due respect to the very able translators of the NIV, I beg to differ from them in their translation. The word "fear" should be retained as in the KJV and the NASB. Reverence appears to be too weak a word for what the Teacher says though "fear" does seem to overstate the issue.

First, the Teacher tells us that God has given us a hunger for eternity, but we are physically unable to attain it. Our finite minds just cannot fathom eternity. In any case, God has chosen not to reveal to man what will happen after he dies (*See Ecclesiastes — Some Challenging Passages*). God has set strict perimeters to our knowledge and experience. We are earth bound though we have an appetite for eternity. This gives us a sense of our own smallness. There is, therefore,

nothing better than to realize our perimeters and to enjoy ourselves within these perimeters.

The second point we are told is that "everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it or taken from it." This goes back to the theme of 3:1-8, and it reminds us that God is sovereign over us. We must know our limits!

The third thing is that God will judge. Although Solomon may not know as much about the after-life as we do now, yet he knew enough to say that "God will call everything into account." We need the stick as we do the carrot. We need to be told that the one who lives for self not only forfeits enjoyment in life, he has to face judgment one day. There is a day of reckoning for everyone.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I believe Solomon is saying much more than a reverential attitude towards God. He wants us to see that we have a moral boundary within which we find true enjoyment. Beyond those boundaries, we find judgment from God.

Thot: "The fear of the LORD is pure" (Ps 19:9).

Day 9**Despite Injustice**

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

*(See Ecclesiastes — Some Challenging Passages)**"God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked."*

We like to see the wicked punished, and the righteous triumph over the wicked. But this is not always so in life. We see injustice entrenched in high places. The one who tries to do what is right often loses. In such circumstances we can get discouraged.

If we move from the abstract to the mundane, we see this reality from day to day. Some of us feel that we have been unjustly passed in a promotion. You may be better at the job, but the one who is better at boot-licking gets the promotion. You thought your boss was discerning, but he dismissed you for a "Yes" man. Purchasing officers decide to stop buying from you because your competitors give personal kick-backs. Under such circumstances, it is easy for us to ask, "Why doesn't God reward me for my struggles to live a holy life?"

Addressing such injustices in life, the Teacher calls us to accept it as part and parcel of life. You may choose to fight injustice, but be prepared to lose your case. So what comfort is there? The believer is comforted because "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked,

for there will be a time [of reckoning] for every activity, a time [of reckoning] for every deed." Beyond the horizons of birth and death, God the ineffable, sits as judge.

All Solomon knew was that God would judge both the righteous and the wicked. With regards to the verdict of judgment, he asked, "Who can bring him [to death and back] to see what will happen after him?" The Teacher did not know how God would judge, but *he knew the character of the judge*. By faith, he refused to become discouraged by the prosperity of the wicked, but found comfort in the unfailing justice of God. When we have faith in the person of God, even though we may not know all his plans, we can accept an unfair lot and still enjoy life.

Thot: To survive the injustices of man, we need to savor the justice of God.

Day 10**Despite Oppression**

Ecclesiastes 4:1-6

"Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind."

Realistic again! Solomon is hard as nails in tackling the issue of how we can enjoy life on this earth. While we like to think that the right will always prevail, we should know better. In life, the righteous are often oppressed, and have no recourse other than to look beyond this earthly existence. (Was that not a sub-theme in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus?) The Teacher calls us to look at the realities of life and still be able to enjoy it. The Teacher is bringing us to the point where we can see and experience oppression, and know how to handle it.

We look at the big picture. The Teacher tells us that he saw the oppressed weeping and there was no human help for him. His lot was so miserable that it would have been better for him not to have been born (How Job felt in Job 3:3-16). Can such a person enjoy life?

First, we see that "all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor." The oppressed takes comfort in that the oppressor does so because of the hunger in his own heart. His obsession for more causes him to grab more and more

to fill a heart of envy and disquiet. But he will never be satisfied no matter how much he squeezes from us, or how he oppresses us. His life is meaningless and a chasing after the wind.

The one who gets discouraged by the oppressor is like the fool who folds his hands and gives up on the situation. He is not ruined by the oppressor as much as he is ruined by his own inability to handle oppression.

The person who really comes out on top is the one, who, despite the little he has for himself and his family, has peace in his heart. He may have only a handful, but he has tranquility. There is no gain for the oppressor who has two handfuls, but chases the wind.

That: Full hands and empty hearts provide no enjoyment.

Day 11**Top of the World**

Ecclesiastes 4:7-16

*"There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother."*

I am not a mountaineer. But I did have occasion to climb a small mountain (I think it is less than 5,000 feet). But from the National Geographic magazines, and my own limited experience, when you are on top, there is a beautiful panoramic view. There is a sense of achievement (only a little one in my case) and the elation the heart feels when our eyes feast on the beauty spread below our feet.

But I did not notice anyone living on the mountain top. It is too inhospitable. We train for weeks and exert for days to attain a moment of victory. Some will come down from one mountain to climb yet another; one that is higher and more challenging, one that gives an even greater sense of achievement and elation.

I am not talking about mountain climbing. I am saying what the Teacher says. He sees a person can be without friend or kin in the pursuit of position. There are some who climb to the very top, and found themselves in hostile territory. For another moment of success, they climb another mountain of success, only to find that with each higher success, there is greater

loneliness. It is indeed "a miserable business."

He postulates a wise youth (4:13ff) who becomes king on account of his ability. He succeeds the old and ineffective king. But when he grows old, the next generation no longer accepts him. The successor becomes like the previous king, waiting to be displaced. "This too is meaningless and a chasing after the wind."

To enjoy life, we need to know that the one who trades friendship and companionship for achievement does so only to reward himself with misery and emptiness. True enjoyment does not lie in greater achievement, but in discerning friends and keeping close friends. "If one falls down, his friend will help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"

That: To enjoy life, enjoy friends!

Day 12**Serious with God**

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God."

If we want to enjoy life, we need to be serious with God. The special emphasis here is that when we make a vow to God, we must keep it. That was probably a prevailing problem at that time. Today, we still see a little of this.

About a year ago, a brother came to me and asked me to expand my work in Christian Media. He repeated his commitment several times, and told me that he would finance the funds needed for staffing and other improvements. We went ahead with the improvements only to find that to this day we have not seen a single cent from him, and he has only given more conditions!

I hope this does not describe you. The Lord is not pleased when we either make commitments we do not intend to fulfill, or when we make commitments with the intention to fulfill, but do not carry them through. Whether the commitment be in finance or in service for the Lord, we need to honor it. The sacrifice of fools are empty words of commitment. It is better that we do not make a commitment than to try and go back on it. In the business world, a person can argue that it is not in black and white. But when it

comes to the Lord's work, God hears us and holds us to the commitments we make.

To enjoy life, we need to stand in awe before God. This must go beyond the commitments we make in church. Jesus Christ tells us that our "Yes" must be "Yes" and our "No" must be "No." This is so important, our Lord tells us, that anything else other than the absolute reliability of our word is from the evil one (Matt 5:37). God is very concerned with our verbal commitments. The blessing of peace and joy comes to the person who keeps his word.

The Bible does not require us to say everything we know. It gives us two options: say the truth or don't say anything at all. All else is from the devil.

That: Don't say it unless you mean it!

Day 13**Square One**

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

"He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart."

I saw a bumper sticker that said, "DON'T CHEAT! THE GOVERNMENT HATES COMPETITION!" That bumper sticker comes to mind when I read this passage. We are told that oppressors squeeze what they can from those under them, only to give it to a higher official who eyes his wealth, who in turn has to surrender what he makes to the king. What the king left behind, the increased appetite of that person and his family consumes. We pursue wealth only to give some away and consume the rest.

The next rich man Solomon paints for us is one who succeeds in retaining his wealth. He did not use wealth to feed his appetite, and is probably considered a scrooge by others. He stores his wealth only to worry about it. *He gains wealth and loses sleep.* What a miserable life! The laborer who eats what he labors for with his hands has no fear that he will starve. But the rich man who depends on the manipulation of funds to live, worries that his money may be lost through a single mistake. What does he have to live on then? What skill does he have to survive?

The Teacher explains that toilsome labor is of virtue and one should enjoy this God-given lot. Likewise, the man who prospers, not through evil means, but through the honest effort and the blessings of God, should also accept his lot as a gift from God. The issue is not so much that wealth robs us of joy, but that the pursuit of wealth apart from God robs us from true enjoyment of life. Both toilsome labor and wealth are equally effective instruments for us to enjoy life. What is true is that the rich are few and those who need to toil are many.

The measure of whether or not we are enjoying life in the way God intends is given here. If we live our lives without looking forward to our retirement (modern equivalent of what is said) we are enjoying our lives. Today brings happiness, and tomorrow brings joy — because God is there.

Thot: If we cannot enjoy what we are and have, we will not enjoy what we will be or will have.

Day 14**Square One Again**

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

"For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?"

What is good? To have the good life, we need to have the good. The world holds dear: money, a good name, pride, and power. The Teacher asks if these should be our goals.

The wealthy man can afford to eat the finest food. But many who have the means to eat lack the ability to do so. In fact, the body can take only so much rich food before it begins to react. Many eat too much and end up with health problems which in turn restrict their diet. Others overwork and have forgotten how to enjoy food. Of what use is money when it cannot buy the most basic pleasure of eating?

People have an instinctive desire to be remembered. They feel a need to reproduce more of themselves. So a man raises, say a hundred children. Yet, in all likelihood, he will not be remembered very long after he is gone. What is the use of a hundred children when there is none to remember us?

The wise man carries himself with dignity. Confucius, the ancient Chinese sage, is known to refuse food if the food is not properly laid out. But starve him a few days and we shall see if he will eat. The wise and the foolish are alike in that both are subject to the same appetites. We live within the same perimeters though the wise may exalt himself above the foolish.

The one who prides himself in his strength or power will face a time when there comes one stronger than he. He backs down and all his bragging makes him only more foolish.

The material things of this world have a mysterious way of vanishing when we think we have them. Just when we think we have made progress in the world, we find ourselves back on square one. All the above items start out as legitimate goals. All our natural appetites are given by God for us to enjoy His blessings. When these appetites gain control over us, good desires become perverted into disproportionate lusts.

That: When God's good gifts are abused, they ensnare.

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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.