

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Profitable Labor

*What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)
There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should
make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.
(Ecclesiastes 2:24)*

As a believer in the inspiration of all Scripture, I do not believe that any passage contradicts another. When I see what appears to be a contradiction, I take the appearance as a clue to dig deeper and to research both passages till I find harmony between them. This sentiment of Ecclesiastes 2:24 appears at five strategic points throughout the book (2:24; 3:12; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9). Walter Kaiser in *Everyman's Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes: Total Life* notes these passages (with the exception of 3:12) as conclusions to Solomon's various excursions in search of meaning "under the sun." He defines the sections of Ecclesiastes as follows:

1. (1:2-2:26) Investigation of personal experiences and observations.
2. (3:1-5:20) God's schemes and seasons.
3. (6:1-8:15) Inequities.
4. (8:16-12:14) Mysteries need not hinder joy.

At the conclusion of each logical section, and after concluding that each pursuit is vanity, engaged without considering God and His directions, Solomon adds a delightful punctuating alternative. When any of these pursuits is defined by God's will and presence, and engaged according to His ways, life is transformed from "vanity and vexation of spirit" to a meaningful and joyful experience.

I believe Kaiser rightly follows Solomon's reasoning. We live in an age when our culture at large exhibits a highly indulgent, "It is all about me" attitude. This culture is collapsing before our very eyes, but few people in positions of leadership in our culture show sufficient courage to stand up

and remind the culture that its decline is self-imposed by this hedonistic bent.

That a human culture is indulgent and self-absorbed is no new thing. The focused history of mankind in Scripture, as well as general history texts, document that self-absorption is a significant factor in the decline of almost all extinct cultures. The greater alarming feature is that our Christian culture presently seems to have taken a deep drink from the same "It is all about me" philosophical well. If we talk about discipleship and cross-bearing in terms of superficial change, the idea will be readily accepted. If you define self-denial in New Testament terms, a growing number of people within the Christian community reflect a puzzled look, as if they have no idea whatever about such a radical form of Christianity. The Barna group occasionally publishes survey data that compares ethical values among Christians compared with the culture at large. Their reports show no significant moral or ethical distinction between people in the general population who profess no faith in Christ and Christians who claim to be "Christians."

Solomon confronts the hard questions of life head-on and pursues the answers with sufficient determination that the superficial Christian will become very uncomfortable. Scarlet O'Hara's "Oh well, I'll think about that another time" attitude is alive and well among many professing Christians. We'd rather live within our self-defined cocoon, even if it exists only in our imagination, than to face those hard questions of life as it really is and have to risk changing the way we live. It is no surprise that you will likely not meet many modern Christians who tell you that Ecclesiastes is their favorite book of the Bible!

I recently had a lengthy conversation with a person whose church had just suffered a tragic melt-down (not a Primitive Baptist church, but tragic in its failure to follow basic New Testament ethics in what should have been a simple church decision). "It isn't fair" was this person's repetitive response. Of course it isn't fair. We live in a fallen world, fatally flawed by the entrance of sin, not the ideal world that God created in the beginning. Did God create the universe and impose robotic control over everything that occurs? Or did He create the universe, bestow moral perception upon man, and assign moral responsibility and consequences to man for the conduct that he chooses?

In the chaos of the Babylonian captivity the people left in Judah looked around at the near-hopeless condition of the nation and apparently decided that God had caused everything by absolute determinism. They even claimed that their own cruel idolatrous worship of pagan deities was divinely ordained (Jeremiah 7:9-10). Jeremiah fiercely rejected this abominable error. He didn't affirm it! On several occasions throughout his prophecy Jeremiah specifically rebuked the people and reminded them that their idolatrous worship, the true cause of their present pathetic condition, was in no way caused or permitted by God. In Ecclesiastes 9:11 Solomon will affirm that "...time and chance" occurs in every person's life. If God determined every event, either causatively or passively, directly or indirectly, there could be no such thing as "time and chance." All events would be absolutely determined and fixed. Rather than affirming this idea, Solomon, along with Scripture generally, rejects it as false.

Solomon's final conclusion in 12:14 is a warning of final and certain, though delayed, divine judgment of every work, even of the intentions that evoked the works. If God directly or indirectly caused sinful actions, He could not then judge man for committing them. Imagine the first sin committed in the Garden of Eden. If Adam and Eve's sin were divinely orchestrated, Adam finds himself in a senseless dilemma. If he obeys the spoken command of God not to eat the forbidden fruit, he obeys God's spoken will. If he disobeys the spoken word and eats the forbidden fruit, he does so by divine force

that he cannot resist or do otherwise. Either way he is obeying God, and either way he is disobeying God. Paul's detractors accused him of this senseless error, but Paul intensely rejects it (Romans 3:1-8). He specifically makes the point that if our sins in some mysterious way honor God, God has lost His moral integrity and cannot then judge mankind for sins committed.

Solomon restores meaning and moral integrity to an otherwise hopeless scene by his assurance that God shall judge all actions and motives of mankind. For my friend who complained that his/her church fell prey to a lapse in spiritual integrity, "It isn't fair," Solomon's answer is clear. Of course it isn't fair, so what? We live in an unfair world, but God knows every unfair and sinful deed. Divine memory is infinite. Solomon never tells us when or how God shall judge every sinful deed and motive, but he assures us that He shall indeed do so.

If I embrace Solomon's assurance of God's righteous judgment, however long delayed, I am then free to live my life with dignity and righteous conduct, regardless of what happens. I have hereby relinquished my usurped position of judge and jury, leaving those roles rightly in God's hands.

Is there value in honest work and godly living, or is it all "vanity and vexation of spirit"? Solomon will repeatedly shout out to us that life is a gift of God to be lived to the fullest and to be enjoyed. However, the realization that not only life, but enjoyment of life is a divine gift will transform how we live and what we do for our joy. The transformed Christian who joins Solomon in applying life-changing Biblical truths to his/her daily choices and conduct will sing with conviction "*This is my Father's world*" and live life to the fullest.

Is it realistic to preach the gospel and honestly expect people to change the way they live? I say it is not only realistic, but that failure to apply gospel truth to our lives so that we are radically transformed falls distinctly short of Biblical Christianity. If we hope to "turn the world upside down" by our faith, we must live differently than the world that is morally upside down. Solomon will challenge us to be bold and forceful in our pursuit of life and godliness. His exhortation mirrors a New Testament truth, "*And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.*" (Colossians 3:23)

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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