

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES

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Conduct guided by Conviction is

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- To dethrone God is to lose the Key of
Life.
To enthrone God is to enter into Life.

THE book of Ecclesiastes is the third and last of the wisdom books of the Old Testament. Its ultimate message is that of the book of Proverbs, which is epitomized in the words:-

**“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart,
And lean not onto thine own understanding:
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct thy paths..”**

In the last chapter and the closing verse of the book of Ecclesiastes, these words occur:

“Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.”

The whole duty of man, then, is to **“fear God, and keep His commandments.”** That expresses the same philosophy as that of Proverbs, though in different words. What then is the difference between these two books? In Proverbs wisdom is first defined, and then her voice is heard throughout.

In Ecclesiastes we have something quite different. Wisdom is still essentially the same. In God it is His ultimate knowledge. In man, therefore, it is the result of right relationship to God. While in Proverbs the way of wisdom is described, in Ecclesiastes the results of disobedience are set forth. In this book we have the revelation of the experience of a man who failed to fear the Lord, and therefore lost the key to the ultimate knowledge and wisdom. In the study of this book we must be clear in our own mind as to the difference between the time when it was written, and the time when the writer passed through the experiences he describes.

Ecclesiastes is not a diary. It is, as we saw when we studied its content, a sermon; that is, one set discourse. The text is first given; the introduction is in proper place; and then the main body of the discourse proceeds in regular sequence to mass the evidence to the truth of the proposition of the text.

The attitude of the preacher must be understood, or we shall miss the value of the book. Through all his experiences he never lost his intellectual conviction of the existence of God. He was neither infidel nor agnostic. Unless a man profoundly believe in the existence of God, he will never say **“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”** when he is trying to live without God. There is a deadly satisfaction possible to a man if he can once rid himself of his belief in the existence of God. It is deadly because it is similar to the satisfaction resulting from the use of an opiate. All the restlessness of humanity is cause for thankfulness in that it reveals the underlying sense of God. All the sob and agony of Ecclesiastes is the outcome of the fact that the man whose experience it describes never questioned the existence of God.

Notwithstanding all this, the answering attitude of fear described in the book of Proverbs was absent. He believed in God, but lacked the fear which is the beginning of wisdom. He did not trust in the Lord with all his heart. He did lean upon his own understanding. Believing in the existence of God, he did not in all his ways acknowledge Him, and consequently his paths lacked direction, and he wandered over trackless deserts in an agony of desire without satisfaction.

The book of Ecclesiastes, therefore, is a mirror in which we see what life becomes when it is lived without submission to intellectual conviction. The permanent values of the book are two.

- The first is that of the revelation of the vanity of life unwieldy to God; and
- The second is that of a brief statement of what true wisdom is.

The revelation of the vanity of a godless life is sevenfold.

In studying the preacher’s account of his own experiences, we observe in him:

- An oblique outlook upon the universe,
- A misconception of God,
- A religion of fear and fatalism,
- An attitude of cynical indifference,
- A narrow conception of life,
- A false earnestness and
- A hopeless pessimism.

He had an oblique outlook upon the universe.

This is the euphemistic method of expressing the truth. A friend of mine, discussing with me the brilliant articles which appeared in the *Spectator* in former days from the pen of Hutton, declared that while they still are full of fascination, as revelations of the times in which they were written, they are of no use to-day. When I asked him how he accounted for it, he bluntly replied, "Hutton squinted at everything." Not perfectly catching his meaning, he explained by saying that Hutton saw only one aspect of things, and, therefore, while his articles appealed to men who lived in the midst of the circumstances with which he dealt, at the distance of a quarter of a century they are valueless.

The book of Ecclesiastes gives us the picture of the universe, which results from this kind of outlook. This man saw its machinery, but not its motive. He looked intently, and discovered things the scientific accuracy of which it has taken centuries to discover - such as the fact that the winds move in circuits; that rivers rising in the mountains flow to the sea and return again. When he declared that all was vanity, he was oppressed with the constant grind of the machinery of the universe, and that because he had no communion with the Master Spirit controlling the machinery, or, as we have said, had no consciousness of the motive.

If one having no knowledge of machinery should be placed in the midst of the flying spindles and turning wheels of a Lancashire cotton mill, he would in all probability be oppressed by the monotonous movement; but if that machinery is understood from the standpoint of the counting-house where the masters of the movement are directing, in order to the completion of the fabric which is to serve the purposes of countless multitudes, he would discover the music of the machinery. The outlook of the man whose life is not one of fellowship with God is oblique, and the result must inevitably be that of depression.

This outlook resulted in a misconception of God.

Neglecting the primary matter of personal dealing with God, he looked out upon the world; and observing its natural phenomena and its social conditions, attempted to discover God through them, and thus came to his misconception. His observation did not allow him to deny the Divine government of the universe, but he only saw it as the government of forces and so God became to him merely the presiding genius maintaining the movement of the machinery without any high purpose. Not recognizing that God has dealings with man in the highest things of his life, failing to discover the issue towards which all things are working, looking merely at them in their motion, he came to the conclusion that there was no advantage in wickedness or in goodness.

All things happened to all men in the same way, whether they were wicked or good. His conception of God is clearly evidenced in the fact that the name Jehovah is never found in the book. Elohim, the word which indicates majesty and might, is the only one he made use of. He had no conception such as that indicated by the word Jehovah, which suggests the fact that God draws near in grace to human life, becoming to each individual what it needs for its perfecting.

As the result of this misconception of God, this man's religion was a religion of fear and fatalism.

He tried everything - knowledge, mirth and licentiousness. He had considered the mechanism of the universe; he had observed the social oppression existing on every hand; then he declared his religious position. "**Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God.**"

It is perfectly true that there is an application of that word which we often make, and which is necessary and proper, that, namely, of insisting upon the necessity for reverence in the hour and the place of worship. It is perfectly certain, however, that the writer meant a great deal more than that. Having put God out of practical account in personal life, and having therefore come to a false conception concerning Him, the only thought of worship which remained to him was that of fear in a slavish sense.

It was not that he was afraid of hurting God, but rather fear lest God should hurt him. His only idea, then, of religion was that, in the presence of the relentless might of God, it was wise to be careful. The whole truth is revealed in his sense of the distance of God; "**God is in heaven, and thou upon earth.**"

The outcome of all this was that he at last adopted an attitude of cynical indifference.

He declared that it was best never to be amazed at anything. He urged men not to be troubled by the conditions of life existing around them. His whole philosophy may be expressed in the terms of advice with which we are familiar in our own day. Do not be surprised at anything; never be anxious; and above everything, do not be extremists. Notice well the calculating cynicism of the advice, "**Be not righteous over much. neither make thyself over wise.**" Strike the happy medium, and let things alone. It was the attitude of cultivated indifference to conditions which have troubled, and it resulted from the fact that life was not considered in its personal, direct, immediate relationship to God.

The inevitable result was that his outlook was narrow.

Wherever he looked he saw the shadow of his own personality. He had no vision of anything beyond the present world. Consequently he dreaded death for the simple reason that it ended life. He considered that beyond death he would not be able to remember the things he had left behind. His conception of life was narrowed by geographical boundaries, and the limitations of the calendar.

Contentment with such a conception was impossible, and the outcome was false earnestness.

This is expressed in the words, **“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”** Again we have a quotation which we constantly make use of in an entirely different way from that intended by the writer, neither is it wholly unjustified. If there be the larger outlook on life, it is well that we do with our might whatever we find to do; but in the case of this man it was the last advice of pessimism. In view of the fact that there was nothing beyond the present life, he decided that the best thing possible was to make the most of the present life, to put all the forces of life into present realization.

The ultimate consequence of the process was that of the hopeless pessimism expressed in ‘the text, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Here, then, is the permanent value of the book. It reveals the fact that if a man put God out of count in the actuality of his conduct, no matter how accurate his intellectual conviction may be, these things inevitably follow.

- His outlook upon the universe is oblique;
- He comes to a misconception of God;
- His religion becomes that of fear and fatalism;
- He presently assumes an attitude of cynical indifference;
- His conception of life is narrow;
- Into the activities of the near things he puts deadly and disastrous earnestness; until at last, weary of everything, he exclaims: **“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”**

The second supreme value of the book is its statement of what true wisdom is. **“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”** The section which culminates in this declaration commences: **“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.”**

This passage again has received interpretation which is startlingly out of harmony with its simplest intention. In my study I have an old *Encyclopedia of Sermonic Literature*, and it is interesting to note the titles of sermons preached on this text, all of them more than thirty years ago. One will suffice as illustration: *The Ironical Permission*. As a matter of fact, there is no irony whatever in the text. It is a plain call to a young man to rejoice in his youth. The final declaration, **“For all these things God will bring thee into judgment,”** is not intended to fill the heart with terror, but rather to indicate the true line of wisdom. God intends the young man to rejoice, and to enter into the world of hope and joy, but he must ever remember that all these capacities of his being must not be abused, because God will require account of the way in which His gifts have been used. The intention is exactly the same as that contained in the words of Proverbs:-

**“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart,
And lean not onto thine own understanding:
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct thy paths..”**

Finally, in the words of Ecclesiastes, already quoted: **“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments.”** To forget God is to enter into life, and to fail of all its profoundest value, until the heart cries out, **“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”** To **“fear God, and keep His commandments”** is to enter into life, and to live in all the fullest sense of the word.

What, then, is the living message of this book? Surely it is declared when the permanent value is discovered. Yet let me attempt to state it briefly in other words. The first note of the message is that conviction affects character through conduct. We cannot escape from that, whether we be Christian or not. It is an eternal principle. Conduct untrue to conviction is destructive. Conduct guided by conviction is constructive. Conviction of God yielded to by the conduct of obedience produces the character of contentment and of strength. The same conviction disregarded in conduct issues in character of discontent and weakness.

- In the book of Proverbs I find the white light, indicating the direction of wisdom.
- In the book of Ecclesiastes I have the red light, revealing the way of vanity.
- To dethrone God is to lose the key of life.

Man may try knowledge, he may turn to mirth, he may employ wealth, he may - to use the thought of the writer, and the language of this century - see life; but if he attempt to enter into these things without God, he has lost the key, and the innermost shrines he cannot discover. On the other hand, if in all his ways he acknowledge God, count Him, enthrone Him; then answering his intellectual conviction, he will find the key of life, and knowledge will become power, mirth a perpetual refreshment, wealth a means of helpfulness, and in all fullness he will see life. These Old Testament teachings are all fulfilled in the New Testament.

The whole philosophy is expressed in the words of Jesus: **“This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him Whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ.”**

To know and obey Christ, and so to know and obey God, is to find all the doors of life open:-

**“In Thy presence is fullness of joy;
At Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”**

Whatever may be the circumstances of the passing hours, wealth or poverty, adversity or prosperity, sunshine or shadow; out of all, the true values are obtained if God is enthroned. If not, then whatever path be chosen or course pursued, the ultimate language of experience will be: **“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”**

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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