

## FINDING FULFILLMENT IN LIFE

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 10-14; 4:9-12, 5:1-7

You've heard the question regarding a glass containing water at the mid-level. Is the glass half filled or half empty? The answer a person gives is supposed to tell the questioner if that person is a pessimist or an optimist. I'm not sure how accurate that assessment is, but we do realize that many people have a sense of emptiness in their life (regardless of what happens) and others have a sense of fulfillment (regardless of what happens). Most people are somewhere in the middle and how they feel about emptiness or fulfillment actually depends on what happens or doesn't happen. We might conclude that some are always low, some are always elated, and most are on an emotional roller coaster.

What makes the difference if we are perpetually down, always up or oscillating? The simple answer is that our perspective on or of life determines how we process what is going on around us. If we think that everything is ultimately futile and we live and die and that's it, then we may have a generally negative view of life and are unable to enjoy even the simplest of pleasures. For example, several years ago I had commented to another person that the fall colors in our area were just spectacular. The comment that came back was, "well, that's not going to last very long." On the other hand, if we believe that heaven is our home and this time on earth is how God is getting us ready to live with Him forever, then we can "rejoice in all things." Those in the middle probably have not given a lot thought to the bigger picture beyond what happens "right now" and they are "elated" when the sun is bright or it is the weekend and they are "despondent" when it is raining or it is Monday morning. You've heard the song that has the lyrics "rainy days and Mondays get me down." The first verse is "Talkin' to myself and feeling old. Sometimes I'd like to quit; Nothing ever seems to fit; Hangin' around, nothing to do but frown; Rainy days and Mondays always get me down." That's a fairly accurate commentary on how many people feel about and approach life.

In Solomon's debate with himself regarding the meaning of life, he examined the question from a prospective of the cyclical nature of life and how we might put it all in a proper perspective.

### Time is Opportunity – 3:1, 10-14

<sup>1</sup>There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven— Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NASB95)

<sup>10</sup>I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. <sup>11</sup>He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. <sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; <sup>13</sup>moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup>I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has *so* worked that men should fear Him. Ecclesiastes 3:10-14 (NASB95)

Is time a threat or is it an opportunity? Some may see time as a threat from a perspective of the futility of life and that (according to their outlook) things are going to get worse and not better. A really bad case of such pessimism could lead to suicide. If we conclude that nothing good can come from our circumstances and things are only going to get worse, then they may wind up with the conclusion that Job reached that it would have been better if they had never lived. A less pessimistic view of time as a threat would be from the perspective of those who are doing well and enjoying life and they realize that life is short and it will all be over in a few decades.

A better perspective is that time is one of our most valuable resources. It is the

opportunity for getting ourselves prepared for eternity and what happens in this realm of time is a whole spectrum of other opportunities. As Solomon expressed it in verses two through eight there is a time for living and a time for dying. If we go back to the glass of water, we might say there is a time for filling and a time for emptying. So what is the answer to the question of “is the glass half full or half empty?” The correct answer is that (based on the information provided), you cannot tell. It depends on the circumstances. Was the glass being filled or was it being emptied? You have to know the context of the bigger picture to assess whether something is good or bad. Things in and of themselves cannot be judged to be good or bad without a proper context.

That brings us to the question of what is the proper context for viewing everything that happens under the sun? Starting in verse 10 and continuing into verse 11 we see a context starting to develop. First, we see that God is the initiator of the circumstances of our lives and the “tasks” or work that we need to do in this realm of time. The word for tasks is translated travail in the KJV and there is an implication of some unpleasantness or hard work (toil) in the Hebrew meaning. This toil aspect can be traced back to the fact that mankind (Adam) sinned and the result was that he would earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. This hard work or travail is part of the process of preparing us for eternity. If everything were simply handed to us, then there would be not growth or development or progress and everything would really go into a mode of deterioration which would lead to despair and hopelessness.

The second thing we see is that beyond providing “what” happens, God also is in control of “when” it happens. For example, there is a time for planting and a time for reaping. The third part of the context is found in the second part of verse 11. Most translations essentially say that God has given man an awareness of the reality of the spiritual or eternal realm (He has set eternity in the heart of man) but man is not capable of understanding the overall purpose of God from the beginning of time to the end of time. Young’s Literal Translation renders this part of verse 11 as “that knowledge (of eternity) He hath put in their heart without which man finds not out the work that God hath done from the beginning even unto the end.” According to this translation, the knowledge (that God is in control and that life is more than just this earthly experience) allows us to have an appreciation of what God is doing with mankind. We have some understand and appreciation of God’s overall plan and we have called it God’s Plan of Salvation.

If we have an appreciation of God’s plan of salvation and realize that “all things do really work together for good” then how should we respond to the ups and downs of life and the experiences we have? Solomon spells it out in verse twelve. Rejoice in whatever happens and do what we can to make the world and life around us better than we found it throughout our life. In addition, we should enjoy the fruit of our labor and accept both the labor and harvest as gifts from God. The final thing is for us to realize that we are not going to improve on God’s plan and we don’t need to try to find another means of salvation. What He has done is complete and perfect and when we see that His plan is both necessary and sufficient, then we will have that proper respect that is akin to the confidence a small child has in his or her parents upon whom he is totally dependent. This is the filial fear or family respect that children have for their father in a healthy family relationship.

#### True Friends Can Help – 4:9-12

<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. <sup>10</sup>For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. <sup>11</sup>Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? <sup>12</sup>And if one can overpower him who is alone,

two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NASB95)

Once we see a proper perspective of why we are here on this earth and what life is about, then that should influence how we interrelate with other people. Starting in chapter four, Solomon looked at a spectrum of how people relate to each other. In the early verses of this chapter, he examined oppression of the powerless by the powerful. Such injustice causes those who are afflicted to despair of living. They conclude that they would be better off dead than alive. This could be the motivation for revolution. As Patrick Henry stated in the Virginia Convention of 1775, "Give me liberty or give me death."

From the courts and legal system, Solomon then examined what happens in the business world or commerce. He saw two extremes of people. One is the person who is driven by greed or a competitive spirit who thinks that success is getting ahead of his neighbor. It is the drive to be number one. Striving for excellence is a good thing if the motive is right. If achieving excellence is an expression of worship and appreciation of the bounty and blessings from God, rather than selfish pride from a fleshly competitive spirit, then that is a good thing. The other type is the foolish person who will do nothing other than consume all his resources and this guarantees no success but continued idleness and pleasure seeking. This method of functioning only works when there are injustices such as forced redistribution of wealth from the producers to the consumers. Solomon's conclusion was that it was better to be balanced in that we should have a time for hard work and a time for relaxation.

The third area Solomon examined was how we should relate to others in general in life. A person can try to be totally independent and self-sufficient. They live alone, work alone, never enjoy what they have, accumulate wealth and they really have no one with whom they can share their success. Solomon saw that as vanity.

Then we come to verses 9-12 and see a better approach to life and that is to involve others and enjoy the benefits of cooperation and mutual help. Having a close friend or business partner or member of your family on whom you can rely is a great comfort and results in less stress in our lives. In a time when it was dangerous to travel because of thieves that might be roaming about, having two or three people traveling together made a lot of sense. If we bring this idea up to modern times, we could say that having your neighbors watch your house when you are on vacation provides some security when there are people who might try to break in to steal things from your house.

Having a good understanding and a good perspective on life certainly helps us in the "here and now," but it also gives us a better understanding of our relationship to God that really sets the tone and attitude of our lives.

### God Alone is Worthy – 5:1-7

<sup>1</sup>Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup>Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup>For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. <sup>4</sup>When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! <sup>5</sup>It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup>Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger *of God* that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup>For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 (NASB95)

While our relationships and interactions with other people impact our lives and their lives, the most significant relationship is with our Creator. If we really want to find fulfillment in life, then it is important that we pay attention to what has to be the first priority of our human

existence. Unless that relationship is right, then everything we do in our interactions with others will be hindered. Solomon recognized that dealing with God is not the same as dealing with other people. When we interact with a fellow worker, we can present our ideas and listen to his ideas and debate an issue that may be of concern. This is not the right approach in dealing with God. We are not equals. The starting point for interacting with the Almighty is to listen and heed what He says. When a person tries to argue with God regarding how life is to be lived, he simply proves how foolish he is. Solomon called this the sacrifice of fools. For example, we see such foolishness in today's world where many are advocating that character does not count for those in leadership and that the most important consideration for someone in policy making positions is that they are advocates for abortion (falsely call women's health issues) and acceptance of the legitimacy of homosexual behavior. Whatever disagrees with God and His word is deemed as "evil." These "foolish" people are suffering from gross ignorance in that they do not even know that what they are doing is evil.

Solomon was concerned that our prayers can be "impulsive" rather than well-thought-out petitions to the God of all creation. Warren Weirsbe, in his book entitled *Be Satisfied* noted that if we were given a chance to go ask the president of the country for a favor, then we would put a lot of thought and careful consideration into what we would request. John Bunyan noted in *Pilgrim's Progress* that "it is better to have a heart without words rather than words without a heart." If we have a legitimate and well-thought-out request that has been developed from careful consideration and application of what we know to be the revealed will of God, then that desired objective or "dream" is what we should bring to God. The other alternative is that the one who is praying is just mouthing empty words that result in nothing (vanity). This may be related to the words of the Psalmist in Psalms 37:4 "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." If we substitute the word "dreams" for "desires" in this verse, then the relationship is evident.

This same thoughtful and careful consideration applied to the desires of our heart should also impact any vow we make to God. Just as any contract and the consequences should be carefully considered before making a commitment, a vow to God must be carefully done. We have a tendency to have greater respect (fear) of a contract with another person than we do with a contract made to God. It is better to make no vows than make a vow that we either do not intend to keep or one that we might neglect.

The bottom line is that having many dreams and many words (vows) that have not been thoroughly considered results in a lot of emptiness and vanity. Such behavior when applied in our dealing with God shows a blatant lack of respect for Him and our relationship to Him. That is just the opposite of Solomon's admonition to "fear God."