

## READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

### God's Promises Under a Silent Heaven No. 4

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We are, once again, paying attention to the Bible's characteristic manner of stating its doctrine -- by presenting the polarities of truth in counter-position to one another, but rarely showing any interest in reconciliation or synthesis. The truth, as Charles Simeon put it, lies not in one extreme and not in the middle, but in both extremes. Last Lord's Day evening we took up the matter of the tension produced between the twin biblical emphases on the necessity of maintaining purity of doctrine and life in the church, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of maintaining the unity of the body of Christ, no matter the differences of doctrine and behavior that often separate Christians from one another.

Now, tonight, we move on to another continuum of truth in which this polarity, and the tension created between the two poles, causes untold trouble to believers as they seek to make their way as pilgrims through this world. As a minister, I tell you, this is where I live and work. I am dealing with this tension all the time. I am speaking of the tension between the promise of the blessing of the gospel, on the one hand, and the apparent absence of that blessing on the other; between a God of love and kindness and generous provision on the one hand, and a *Deus absconditus*, on the other, a hidden God, who often seems to act in ways we not only do not understand, but cannot seem to reconcile with what we know of his character and his promises. To put it bluntly, God in many lives, at various times and in various ways, seems to make promises that he does not keep! Tell me, you who have been Christians for a long time, that you have never agonized under what seemed to you a silent heaven. You thought you had a right to certain expectations, given what God had told you in his Word, but those expectations were not fulfilled.

And, believe me, it is precisely here that many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, find their difficulties believing that Christianity is true. I read recently that Ted Turner, the arch-enemy of things Christian, claims to have lost his early evangelical faith and his sympathy for biblical Christianity as a result of the death of his sister to leukemia and the subsequent suicide of his father when Ted was a teenager. Where was God and the love of God and the gospel of Christ in all of that in a young and by all accounts ardent Christian's life? [D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Dismissing God*, 232] The Bible seems to say that people who live by faith will receive a hundred times as much in this world (houses, fields, brothers, and sisters), but it is not obvious that this is true. Paul tells us to honor our father and mother so that it will go well with us and so that we will enjoy a long life on the earth. But there does not seem to be any obvious statistical calculation between Christian faithfulness and a longer life. Some very faithful Christians die young and many of the wicked live to a good old age. A thoughtful skeptic would have little difficulty arguing that Christianity is disproved by the simple fact that much of what it promises does not, in any way notably different from the case of other religion or philosophy, come to pass. What are we to do with this? How are we to think of it?

*Well, we are to think biblically about it* and that requires that we think two thoughts at the same time, that we hold two truths in active tension, that we refuse to ignore either of the two poles on

this particular continuum of biblical teaching.

Think first of this emphasis of Holy Scripture.

We have a host of texts, some of the most beautiful and comforting in all of Holy Scripture, that promise or describe the Lord as his children's protector, provider, comforter, and guide. A father who pities his children, a guard who neither slumbers nor sleeps, a Redeemer who will not quench the smoking flax or crush the bruised reed. He is his people's shepherd and promises to lead them by the still waters and cause them to lie down in green pastures. When they trust in him, so say many texts, he will make for them the rough places plain and their paths straight.

We have another very large class of texts that promise peace, joy, and prosperity to those who trust in the Lord. "Delight yourself in the Lord," we read in Ps. 37, "and he will give you the desires of your heart." As I mentioned earlier, "Honor your father and your mother," so Paul interprets the 5th commandment, "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Over and again we are told what, I just reminded you, Jesus told his disciples, "I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields -- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life." What the gospel promises in a hundred ways is "the life worthy to be called life."

And, then, in an untold number of specific ways, we are taught that the gospel, the faith of Christ, *works* in this world. It works in prayer: "ask and you will receive." It works in the life of the soul: "sin shall not have dominion over you;" "the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." It works in the life of the will: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It works in the conflict with enemies: "Resist the Devil and he will flee from you." It works in the affections: "the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." And on and on. The covenant that God has made with us promises us blessings of every kind while we live in this world.

*But, alongside of that great revelation* of the spiritual prosperity and joy that is the inheritance of the saints, we have counterpoised to it the dark reality that Christian living in the world is often at odds with that first picture in ways not easy at all to understand or justify.

Psalm 73 gives us an account of a man whose faith was for some time overwhelmed by his sense that following God's will proved of no benefit to him or to other human beings. He looked around the world and observed that the wicked seemed to be doing just as well as the righteous and, often, considerably better! "My feet had almost slipped...when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" the Psalm begins.

But, especially, I draw your attention to *Ecclesiastes*. This is a book of wonderful power and relevance that I think is far too little appreciated by Christians today. I want to take a few moments and set it before you as the other pole on this particular continuum of biblical truth regarding the integrity of the gospel's claim to bring new life, wonderful life, to those who trust in the Lord.

**Turn to the Book.** We will take a look at its argument. Now, the typical view of Ecclesiastes is that it is an autobiographical account of a search for meaning in life that terminates in the conclusion that meaning can be found only in faith in God and obedience to his commandments. The author tells of his search to find meaning in various things: money, power, pleasure, and the like, but in each case the search ends in disappointment. Finally, at the end of the day, there is nothing left but God and doing his will.

That is, in my judgment, a complete and gigantic mistake and does not at all do justice to what the book actually says. In fact, what this interpretation attempts to do is to make *Ecclesiastes* a voice for the *other* pole of this continuum of truth. That is, its message is, if you want to live a happy, fulfilled, satisfying life, you must trust in God.

In seeking the right interpretation of *Ecclesiastes*, the question to begin with is: what does the author mean by the statement he uses as an inclusio: (1:1 -- 12:8) You know what an inclusio is. It is a statement made both at the beginning and the end of a piece of writing, however long, that identifies the author's theme. Everything in between the inclusio, literally everything "included" in the material between the two identical statements, in other words, has to do with the theme introduced by the inclusio. "Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." Does it mean, as many have thought, that this man, at one point in his life, thought that life was genuinely without meaning, had no objective significance or rationale, because search as he might for that meaning he had been unable to find it?

No, that is not what he means, I am sure of it. He means only that *you and I cannot find out what things mean*. He is going to prove to us that, however hard we try, however eager we are to succeed, we will finally have to admit that we cannot explain what happens in the world, *even as Christians, even as those who trust in the Lord*.

The argument, that this is the true interpretation of *Ecclesiastes*, comes in several parts:

1. First, from beginning to end, this man is a man of faith. 2:24-26; 3:13-14; 6:2; 7:2 passim. There is no place in the book where he looks upon reality or his own experience of it from the vantage point of an unbeliever.
2. Second, He believes in God throughout the book. All through his argument he confesses the God of the Bible as the living and true God in whom he trusts. No matter that he is talking about the punishing mysteries of life, he has no doubt about the character of God!

God is wise: 3:11 passim  
 God is good: 2:24 passim  
 God is just: 3:17 passim

All of these are affirmations of his faith; none of them, of course, can be proven by reason or in a laboratory. They are things Christians know, but know by faith!

3. Third, all that he ever denies throughout his argument is that finite creatures such as we are can figure out what God is doing in his world. This is the thesis of the book and he repeats it many times:
  - a. 3:11, 22 (eternity in the heart)
  - b. 7:14, 27
  - c. 8:16, 17 (for a definition of “meaninglessness” in Ecclesiastes, cf. v. 14 with v. 17). And note his point in v. 15. There is a good sense of “eat, drink, and be merry” (Jesus gives the bad sense in Luke 12:9. Here it is the acceptance of our limitations as God’s creatures and the enjoyment of the gifts he gives us).
  - d. 11:5

None of these is the statement of an unbeliever. What is more *they are true statements* and confirmed by many others in the Bible! You *don't* know what God is doing. The world is full of what we would not have thought it would be full of if the God we know, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is in total control of all that happens in it. I will mention matters at some distance from us, because I do not want to hurt tender hearts, but you know full well that I could illustrate this fact just as easily from the lives of people in this very congregation.

1. A few years ago: Ruthie Codling (the family had devotions that morning before the children left for school! Surely such a family as that ought to have been spared!); a few years ago: Andy Tant, the 16 year old son of a godly couple we know in Nashville;
2. The homosexual couple in Philadelphia;
3. Unmarried single adults who wonder why God has not given them what seems to be his will for the life of his people;
4. The more you read church history, the more pervasive you will realize this reality to be. Just like the Apostle Paul who had to live with a terrible affliction, his thorn in the flesh. He could heal others, but not himself!

Now, none of these people have forsaken the Lord because of the troubles he has visited upon them. They have all understood well enough that God is sovereign, wise, and loving, even if we cannot understand his ways. They know that the Bible taught them to expect that God’s ways would be far above their own and past finding out. They know that, as sinners, they have no right to complain against their heavenly Father’s will. And, above all, they know that the God who sent his Son to redeem them, at such terrible cost to himself, is not playing fast and loose with them. He has a good reason for all that he does and he has their welfare at heart and sees far better than they ever could what that welfare requires.

But, still, there is no simple way to reconcile the promises of prosperity with the actual facts of Christian experience. Both are absolutely true when rightly understood, but they create a tension in our minds and hearts. And there is no other way for us to live than to believe them both, to hold fast to both emphases at one and the same time: both that our heavenly shepherd will lead us beside the still waters and that we will not understand why it is that from time to time, and in some lives seemingly most of the time, “all his waves and breakers” crash over the heads of his

people.

Who is a God like our God that can visit his children with sorrow, sorrow upon sorrow, and his children feel only that they must follow God more willingly and trust him more completely than they have so far done!

In his summary of the thesis of Ecclesiastes, the British scholar, J. Stafford Wright says this:

“The world is not weighted in our favor. But the same things, which break the man of the world, can make the Christian, if he takes them from the hand of God. Go on looking for the key that will unify the whole of life. You must look for it; God has made you like that, sore travail though it be. But you will not find it in the world; you will not find it in life; in revelation you will find the outskirts of God’s ways; in Christ your finger tips touch the key, but no one has closed his fingers on it yet. No philosophy of life can satisfy if it leaves out Christ. Yet even the finest Christian philosophy must own itself baffled. But do not despair. There is a life to be lived day by day. And in the succession of apparently unrelated events God may be served and God may be glorified. And in this daily service of God, we may find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us. That was Koheleth’s philosophy of life. Was he wrong?”

Here then is the dialectic. Our faithful and loving heavenly Father does indeed lead us beside still waters and make us to lie down in green pastures, but, there will be times when only sturdy faith will know it so, so mysterious, so punishing the troubles he orders his children to pass through, so baffling his ways in this world where sin and unbelief so often triumph over faith, hope, and love. If we are true men and women of faith, we will accept that both things are true and insist that our hearts confess them true at all times. We will banish from our hearts both a sentimental faith that does not feel the woe of the saints or seeks to treat their wounds as if they were light and inconsequential *and* banish as well any mistrust of God in the face of the baffling circumstances of life. He is both the God who loves us with an infinite love and a God who does what pleases him in heaven and on earth.