

'WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE, AND JOY'

By Steve Zeisler

Although we have entered on the holiday season, a time of eating, drinking, and exchanging of gifts, as far as true merriment and joy are concerned our world often misses the mark. Depending on the circumstances, our holiday mealtimes can be perfunctory, polite in a forced way, even desperate at times. In keeping with this theme therefore, today we will look at several passages in the book of Ecclesiastes in which Solomon encourages us to enjoy the world which God has created. If we do not experience true joy as Christians, if we see our role as being merely dutiful and responsible, then we are certainly missing a great deal. We must not only look toward eternity, but also be careful to observe and participate in what God is doing in the here and now.

Solomon returns frequently to this theme in Ecclesiastes. Consider 3:12,13:

REJOICE AND DO GOOD

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime, moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God.

Here we have a succinct statement of what Solomon commends to us in the passages which we will look at this morning.

As we have already pointed out, the vision of this book is limited to life as it is perceived and lived "under the sun." The author does not refer to eternity, to anything that exists beyond this world. He does not speak of a relationship with God which begins on earth, grows into maturity, and continues in eternity, as many other passages in the Bible teach. Thus as we read the book we must be aware at all times that this is one of the ground rules for our interpretation. As New Testament Christians, we are privy to much more than Solomon includes in this book, yet he has important lessons to teach us, especially in this area of experiencing joy in the midst of our daily affairs. As the expression has it, he was "on to" something, and we can profit from his wise words.

Chapter 8, verses 14,15 express this theme at the most basic level, and is a good place to begin.

There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.

Life is unpredictable, says Solomon. One can be honest, fair and good, and yet suffer trial and tribulation. On the other hand, one who is selfish and mean-spirited may go through life seemingly untouched by suffering. Thus, Solomon counsels a retreat from the unpredictability of life; "eat, drink and be merry," he advises. He recognizes that the sovereign God determines one's life span, yet in these verses he sees no other active role for God in the processes of life. This is why he advises that one reaction to the capriciousness of life is to enjoy it, to "eat, drink and be merry" in the midst of life's circumstances.

We could call this the "Walkman" approach to life. Put on your headphones, turn up the sound, and escape for

the moment having to deal with immediate problems. This is what a large percentage of voters seem to have done during the political debate which preceded the recent elections. And many of these people then compounded their decision to not listen by abstaining from voting. Life just doesn't seem to work, they reasoned, so why should they bother feigning an interest in things which they felt were remote from them? This is the passive response.

Others who try to escape the realities of life take up esoteric hobbies or sports so as to avoid participation. This is how they deal with the confusion of life.

SATISFIED WITH LIFE

In chapter 5 there is a more profound discussion than the "eat, drink and be merry" response to life's uncertainties. 5:18:

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Contrast this man with the individual whom Solomon speaks of in 6:2:

...a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a sore affliction.

One who possesses many of life's advantages may not have the philosophical outlook, the spiritual resources necessary to enjoy what he has. Yet another who is similarly blessed with life's resources will enjoy every moment of his existence. He even ages gracefully, says Solomon: "...he will not often consider the years of his life" (5:20a). I feel sorry for people who do everything in their power to resist the aging process, those who will stop at nothing in their efforts to appear forever young. On this note, one personality whom I think emerged from the recent elections with reputation enhanced was Barbara Bush. She seems comfortable being who she is. She is a grandmother in her late 60's, and does not attempt to pass herself off as anything other than exactly the woman she is. Outwardly, at least, she seems, in Solomon's words, to be "occupied with the gladness of [her] heart."

Abraham's life is summarized in these verses from Genesis 25:8, "Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people." What an epitaph: he was "satisfied with life." Every step along the way, young man, husband, father, grandparent, statesman, Abraham chose to go with God, to be whom he was called to be and act as God directed him to act. This was why he was, at the end, "satisfied with life." This also is Solomon's counsel.

WORK AND LEISURE

It is important to note that one of the advances made in these verses over what we read in chapter 8 is that here we not only have the "eat, drink and be merry" type of advice. Solomon sees that one's labor also can partake of the presence of God; this too can be the "gift of God." Along with finding joy in leisure, finding joy in what we do in the working world is extremely important in life. These, says Solomon, are a gift from God, and, as such, are bestowed by him as he wills.

So we began with Solomon's word in chapter 8 to the effect that life is capricious. In view of that, the best response is to "eat, drink and be merry." Then we had a note on aging gracefully. Such a person "will not consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart." And to this

Solomon adds a word to the effect that man should enjoy his work, that this is the "gift of God."

A third passage, in chapter 9 this time, adds some more information for our theme. The immediate context here is death. Reflecting upon the fact that all must die, Solomon says in verse 7:

Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Here is Solomon's advice to man in the face of death. Since for the purposes of this book he does not deal with the fact of life beyond death, of an eternity in the presence of God, he commends once more enjoying life and all that it has to offer. Enjoy your food and drink; let your clothes and your appearance reflect your sense of God's approval of you; enjoy your life's partner, and your life's work ("whatever your hand finds to do"). All of these things, he says, are already approved by God. Not only is God sovereign as far as your life span is concerned, and you can enjoy life as a gift from his hand, he has approved already what you are doing. You begin each day with a sense of his love and approval, his delight in creating and redeeming you. Thus you can live with joy, and thank God for all of the good things which you enjoy "under the sun."

KNOWING GOD'S APPROVAL

Many, of course, do not have this sense of God's approval of who they are and what they do. This is why some people dress the way they do, at times outlandishly: they are either seeking approval or expressing anger. Married couples live in tension because they are unsure whether their spouses value them. Some people eat and drink to excess in an effort to avoid the real world. Others put on lavish but loveless dinners in an attempt to gain the love and approval of others. But the man or woman who is aware that he or she is approved by God does not need to do any of these things. He or she can go through life with a cheerful heart, "for God has already approved their works."

The first 'Rocky' movie introduced the character Adrian. She is first encountered working in a pet shop, wearing dull clothes, eyes downcast, mumbling her way through life. But Rocky expresses his interest and confidence in her and this gradually draws her out of herself. As a result, by the end of the movie she has become a different person. There is a similar story line in 'The Man From La Mancha.' Don Quixote, the man who tilts at windmills, sees Aldonza the prostitute as the beautiful Dulcinea, his beloved, and treats her as if she were virtuous and unspoiled. His approval eventually transforms the woman so that she is able to approve of herself.

This is the issue that is at stake here in these verses. According to Solomon, we can know that God has already approved of us. This assurance can remain with us every day of our lives, and that is why he says we should live and act accordingly.

To the unmarried, his counsel to have joy at table, home, fellowship, in your spouse, etc., may be hard to relate to. The general point which Solomon is making, however, remains true for everyone. We should find a way for God in his approval of us to allow us to experience joy in whatever our circumstances are right now. We must not be deceived into thinking that the grass is greener somewhere else. Perhaps your job is not particularly fulfilling, for instance, yet you can still do it with all your might, and experience joy and delight in whatever your hands find to do.

GOD'S PRESENCE

Verses 22 through 24 of chapter 2 is perhaps the most profound expression of our theme, which, as we have pointed out, runs throughout the book:

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that He may give to the one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

Verse 25 here adds an element which we have not had before: God is present through it all. Not only do we receive opportunity and approval from him, we have his presence too. Who can do anything--eat, drink, work, whatever--without God?

Have you noticed the truth of the observation which Solomon makes in verse 26? The selfish end up contributing what they have hoarded to those who are free and loving. Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, it will pour into your lap" (Luke 6:38). Give, and you will find yourself having more, an abundance, to give. Hoard, and you will never have enough. You will even find yourself contributing to the one who is a giver. Here, Solomon describes a life that is overflowing with good things, one that receives everything from the hand of God as a gift--home, work, and all that life includes, bring joy and overflow.

I chose the title of this message, 'Wisdom, Knowledge and Joy,' from verse 25. In the course of this book Solomon finds wisdom and knowledge, but he does not find joy "under the sun," apart from the touch and approval of God. You can eat and drink until you pop, but you will find no merriment in your activity unless God gives it to you. It doesn't take a great deal of insight to discern that Americans have a problem worshipping meals and consumption. Daily we are treated to a recital of the latest celebrity diets and what they have done for someone. But "under the sun," neither Solomon nor our own generation can discover true joy, thankfulness and approval at meals in which we consume foolishly and know only a caricature of love for our companions.

RECEIVING A GIFT

Let us accept these gifts from the hand of God, these ordinary, everyday activities which Solomon speaks of. How do we respond when we are given a gift? Some resist receiving gifts because they do not want to be thankful to the giver. "I did it all and I stood tall, I did it my way," went the lyrics of the popular song a few years ago. If we will receive these gifts from the hand of God, we must abandon this attitude. We are not entitled to that which is really a gift, and we do not have the option of demanding the pattern of the gift. It is the giver who chooses the gift for us, and to Him we owe thanks.

There is a distorted form of teaching abroad today that says we have the right to demand of God certain blessings like health, wealth, etc., and that we should refuse to accept a life that does not include these things. But Scripture nowhere teaches this. Gift-giving is God's prerogative, not his job description. His choice, his timing, his sovereignty overrides everything. All believers have his approval, but this is communicated to us in different ways. Let us be willing to accept from his hand the gift of joy, his approval and his presence in our circumstances. Let us accept these gifts with gratitude, forsaking any desire to atone for our own sins, or any desire to go it alone. Be willing to humbly accept whatever gifts he offers.

We live in a world which tends to abuse the good things that serve to make life enjoyable, a world which does not know how to accept with gratitude good things from God. As we near Thanksgiving, a time which has become distorted into an orgy of self-indulgence, what a great opportunity we have to really give thanks for the gifts God has given us. As we sit down at our tables on Thursday, let us realize that the food which we are about to enjoy comes to us as a gift from God himself, and through it he is telling us that he loves us. Accept his love and approval, and pause and give thanks through Jesus Christ for the gifts of love, food and shelter. Eating, drinking and merriment, wisdom, knowledge and joy, are gifts from his hand.

Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking

on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might...

Lord, if we have no joy, no realization that you have approved of us and that you are present with us, if we have not learned to take delight in food, friendships and opportunity, we have missed the truth of your gospel and fail to honestly testify to it. Help us realize that you love us, that you are committed to us, and that life is a gift from your hand. Then our thanksgiving will overflow and will truly benefit others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Catalog No. 4088
Ecc.2:24-26; 5:18-20
Sixth Message
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November 20, 1988

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