

LIFE IN TRUE PERSPECTIVE

(Taken from “Seasons of Comfort” Volume 2, pages 9-14 by Bro. R. Roberts)

Wherever we have our reading in the Bible, we get the Word of Wisdom. It may differ in shape or hue, but it is intrinsically the same in the sense of being an element of the same system of truth. As light is composed of differently coloured blending rays, and as food is made up of different essential constituents, so divine truth has many ingredients, and they are all necessary to the completeness of the whole.

The book of Ecclesiastes is before us this morning in our first reading, and the work of the apostles in the second. They may not appear to be much connected. We shall find the fact different from the appearance. That there should be such a book in the Bible as Ecclesiastes surprises some. Its absence would be more surprising. The Bible would not be complete without a picture of the present life as it appears in itself from the divine point of view. In Ecclesiastes we have this picture. It is a picture that experience finds to be true. It is unlike human presentments of the subject. Books and men of all sorts glorify human nature and paint human life in bright colours. Men take more naturally to the words of men than to the words of God. Consequently, they all indulge the most pleasing views and ideals, and go forth hopefully to find good. But one after another, they all come to experience the truth of the Word of God, that as human life now is, *“all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”* The pleasing views dissolve as life advances and the grim nature of current facts is slowly realised, though never finally discerned or clearly understood by those who receive not the teaching of Bible wisdom. Illusion more or less prevails to the last, for if a man find not good in his own case, he at least imagines his neighbour has found it—his neighbour all the while thinking perhaps the same of him.

The personal experience of Solomon is made use of by the Spirit of God as the divine limner in the case.

“What can the man do that cometh after the King?”

A man requires to see all to form a correct judgment. Men in a small sphere have always a higher sphere above them on which their imagination acts illusively. They find not good in their own sphere, but they fancy it exists in those others which become to them an object of desire and effort, in the very exercise of which they find a certain satisfaction. In this case, those who have the most happiness are the lowest down, and who have the most contracted knowledge of human life. In this sense Solomon’s words are true:

“In much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”

The men of the largest experience are the least sanguine in all human matters. There would seem in this to be a denial of the other utterance of wisdom:

“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding.”

But seeming and reality are not always the same. It does not follow because increased knowledge of this evil state brings increased sorrow, that therefore, in ultimate and future relations, wisdom is not a tree of life to them that lay hold on her; and that unhappy is every one that retaineth her. It still remains true that in higher application, wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. But, one thing at a time. Human life divorced from God, as it now is upon the earth, is the unhappy thing depicted in this book, and not the beautiful and noble thing represented in all sorts of human philosophies. Therefore, enlarged knowledge is enlarged sadness. This was Solomon’s case; and it is written that we may learn the truth of the matter, and verify it in our actual experience.

There is a great advantage in knowing the truth of the matter because we adjust ourselves to fact all the way along, and find ourselves not disappointed, but enabled rather to turn the days of our vanity to the best account. Those who work upon a false theory of the human situation are like people who, in the dark, should think the path flat when it is downhill with ruts and humps. They stumble and jolt at every step, while those who know the path is downwards and rough, though equally in the dark, they walk carefully, and prepare their steps for downward direction, and consequently get along with comparative comfort. Facts will constantly contradict what are called “optimistic” views of life, and crush enthusiasm and hope at last. The other view—the Ecclesiastes view—being the true view, works the other way. You give it up at the start, and look beyond, to that “beyond” which is even visible at several parts of even this gloomy book. Thus he says,

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting." And again, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, and the heart of fools in the house of mirth."

Why? If there were no "beyond," the argument would turn the other way, surely. If our only spell of life lies in these "three score years and ten", the merrier we make it, the better. But this is not so. At the end of the book, Solomon states the "*conclusion of the whole matter*"—that to "*fear God and keep His commandments,*" is "*the whole duty of man;*" "*for God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.*" Here is a view of matters which the house of mourning helps; which the house of mirth hinders. Who ever was helped by the "*song of fools*" to "*fear God and keep His commandments?*" Experience speaks here with no uncertain voice. "Pleasure" deadens all moral perceptions and inclinations, and leads its votaries downward in the path that leads to death. No one is ever helped to the Kingdom of God by theatre going or novel reading. By these the present life, which is a shadow is stamped on the imagination as the reality; and the purpose of God, which is a reality, is made to appear a myth. Solomon deprecates another illusion which has its roots in the general disease from which we suffer:

"Say not thou, what is the cause that the former days were better than these, for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this."

It seems it is an old habit to consider past times the best. The cause of it is obvious on reflection. It does not lie in the nature of the times; for in this there is no change. There is the same sky all the time, the same shining sun, the beneficent sequence of the seasons, the same beautiful earth with all its bounteous store for man and beast. Yet as a matter of experience, it does seem after a while with every one as if things were not quite so nice as they used to be. Why is this? There is a change somewhere. Where is it? Not in the things around us, but in ourselves. In the youthful days there is greater vigour of faculty, greater intensity of feeling, greater clearness of physical perception of all kinds; therefore greater susceptibility to joy or sorrow. As we get older, ardour dulls down, and nothing has the zest it had to our young faculties. The times seem to change; the "*former*" days begin to look in the retrospect as if they were better than the present. But it is a mere appearance. To take the appearance for the reality is not a wise conclusion. To "*enquire wisely concerning this*" is to direct attention to ourselves: look within: note the fact that we are as the flowers: we have a seed time, a budding time, a blooming time, a withering time, ending in decay and death. The true enquiry is as to the cause of this, and the bearing of the facts on the future. Why are we as we are, and what prospects have we? The answer will show us Adam and Christ. There is no answer apart from them, though the answer is almost universally refused in our day.

"By man (Adam) came death; by man (Christ) came also the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:21).

Here are instructions and hope by which this oppressive dispensation of "*vanity of vanities*" is lightened and made comparatively easy to bear. We know the reason why the highest form of life on earth should be the unhappiest, and how release is to come, and the double knowledge ends the terrible problem of life. There are unhappily, thousands upon thousands to whom this knowledge is legendary, and who esteem it an intellectual degradation to rest on what is a sufficient condemnation with them to call a "theological dogma." A sufficiently searching investigation will reveal their repugnance to be unreasonable. If God has spoken, what He has said must be true.

It comes to this: what is the meaning of Jewish history? Let any man thoroughly study the Bible in connection with all the facts concerned with Palestine and the Jews (including the origin of Christianity in their midst), and he will not be able, in the full exercise of the judicial faculty, which takes every fact into account and assigns to it a harmonious place in the theory of things adopted, to escape the conclusion that God is in that history and in that Bible. This will be best manifest by attempting to frame an account of the matter on any other supposition. Give us a theory of Bible facts and peculiarities that shall harmonise with the idea that Jewish nationality was of human origination, that Jewish institutions were of human contrivance, and that Jewish literature, as it exists in the Bible, was written with human objects. Most men are content to leave this alone. They see one or two prominent facts in the unfavourable light in which hostile writing makes them to appear; they make up their minds and commit themselves to a conclusion which is so perfectly welcome to the natural mind, that they are rather in haste to embrace it; leaving neglected the utterly insoluble problem which the Bible presents in many details on their hypothesis. The problem exists whether they tackle it or

not. It is a problem that no wise man would leave unsettled in view of what it involves. There is only one view of the subject that explains all—and that is, that the case stands as the Bible represents it, that God revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and brought their posterity out of Egypt by the employment of miracle; gave them their law direct from heaven, led them by heaven-helped judges and kings, spoke to them by inspired prophets, generation after generation, and last of all sent to them His son, and laid the basis of the world's reconciliation and hope in his life, death and resurrection. The facts are such as a child can receive, and they are not in nature more incredible than the thousand facts of daily experience. The only difference is that they are not of ordinary occurrence. They happened for a special purpose, and having served that purpose, ceased. They have not been seen by us, but they have been testified to us on grounds sufficient to cause conviction in the class of mind that Jesus says is alone eligible for God's highest favours; the humble minded, docile and believing.

Being received, they supply the key of life. They explain why human existence upon earth is evil, and how it is to be redeemed. The agnostic may say they do not reduce the mystery at the root of all phenomena. Granted: nothing can do this. But it is something to know facts whether we understand them or not. In fact, to know facts, in their relation one with another, is the highest point to which human intellect can reach in any department. The metaphysical conception of their 'modus in esse' is an intellectual impossibility. The absurdity of agnosticism, which is becoming so prevalent in our age—(but the fashion is sure to change) lies in refusing to accept facts on the ground of impossibility of understanding them in the ultra-philosophical sense. Agnostics are not so foolish in other things. Does our agnostic understand how the thought is formed in his brain that enables him to know his own friends or his own property? He is obliged to own ignorance here. But does he therefore refuse to have any friends or property? Not he. He would say, "Bother your philosophy," if you attempted to dissuade him from accepting a dinner invitation or the legacy of a dead friend on the account that it was impossible for him to understand how he knew about them. Why then should he raise an objection to the higher things to which we are practically related to in God through His message to us in the Scriptures? Does he say "I cannot understand eternity: I cannot understand endless space; I cannot understand my own existence?" What has that to do with it? If we cannot understand these things, they are facts, and it is with facts we have to do with. We are here in a boundless universe. We are at the conflux of two endless times. We have appeared now and we did not appear before, and in the ordinary course, we shall shortly disappear. These are the facts we have to deal with. It is the part of a mooning fool to stand still and do nothing because of the inability to grasp the mighty fact. It is the part of common sense to note them, accept them, adjust itself to them, rejoice in them. And it is not the part of common sense to exclude any part of them, and especially when that omission deranges the rest. It is the part of common sense to see that the Bible is part of the facts, as well as Homer's Iliad; that Christ is as much part of the world's history as Julius Caesar; that God is as much a demonstrated reality in the career of the human race upon the earth as the existence of gravitation in the motion of the heavenly bodies. Ignore them, and human life is much more of a riddle than before. They cannot be ignored. They are there. They are truth and the kernel of all truth, having this importance for us that they give light to the darkness of the present life and invest the terrible universe with the glory and comfort of the Father's wisdom and care, and kindle the terrifying future with the radiance of gladsome hope.

Ecclesiastes does not deal with the cure of the vanity that is on the earth so much as with its present reality. And its portraiture does not attenuate or extenuate the blackness. You have it just as it is.

"Behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead that were already dead more than the living that were yet alive."

Human philosophies mix in ameliorating notions. Where they do not deny God altogether, they deny that His face is averted, and speak of His "moral government", and of "compensations" and of "Nemesis" and all the rest; by which they mean that things are pretty right at the bottom, however rough they may be on the surface; that injustices are avenged in the working out of things in the long run, and the tears of the oppressed are wiped away somehow; that, take it all in all, it is a good sort of a world in which all things come to a level; that in brief, all is not vanity and fatuity, but all is conducive to ultimate good in some way or other. Such a view will be found thoroughly artificial. Experience will contradict it at every step and in every phase. It will be found at the last, and in the

solitude of every man's actual individual experience if his range of knowledge be sufficiently wide, that Solomon's picture is the true one, that life as it now is among the fourteen hundred million human inhabitants of the earth is a welter and a turmoil with no issue and no incentive that adequately appeals to the aspirations that slumber dimly in the human breast. It remains for us but to ask "why?" and "how long?" These questions we ask in vain at every source but one. The Bible only tells us that "*the misery of man which is great upon him*" is the result of a break in his relations with God. Man is made for the glory of God. At the very start he refused his mission; and the refusal has been perpetuated in all the lines of his generation. In such a state of things it cannot be that God should openly manifest Himself to man and guide his affairs for him. The law of Moses is an elaborate inculcation of this in all its ritual. Man is cast off and left to take care of himself. God has "*suffered all nations to walk in their own ways*" (Acts 14:16). They are dreadful ways, as all history shows, where no light from God has come to bear. The spectacle may distress; the theory may appal; but such are the facts, and such is their Bible explanation. What other is there?

Hope comes with this explanation; for if there is a "why," there is a "how long." The Spirit of God that tells us God's reason for subjecting the human race to this vanity tells also of a purpose in the case which is described as "*the purpose of Him that worketh all things after the counsel of His own will.*" This purpose God himself announced in the beginning to Moses:

"As truly as I live, the whole earth shall be filled with my glory" (Num. 14:21).

He could therefore say concerning His creation of the earth:

"He made it not in vain; He formed it to be inhabited" (Isaiah 45:18).

The details of this purpose are exhibited in the covenants of promise, and expounded in the Gospel of the Kingdom. They are briefly comprehended in the declaration that He will "*gather together in one all things under Christ*" (Eph. 1:10). Paul says God will do this "*in the dispensation of the fullness of times*"—that is, in the era when the appointed times shall have reached their maturity—styled by Peter "*the times of the restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began*" (Acts 3:21). This purpose is not to be confounded with 'universalism.' While it will embrace all the earth, it will be limited to a selected class only of the countless millions that have passed across the scene during the Adamite era. This we know from the teaching of the Scriptures, and it is brought to a focus in the closing scenes of the Apocalypse wherein we are shown, "*the tabernacle of God with men,*" but are also carefully informed in the very context that "*there shall in no wise enter anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie, but they who are written in the Lamb's book of life*" (Rev. 21:27). It is "*He that overcometh*" that shall inherit all things. Ecclesiastes is a divine presentment of the darkness which now enshrouds human life; the apostolic narrative is a divine exhibition of the way out of the darkness into light. The two are connected and have to be read together. They are both true and necessary elements of instruction. It remains for us to realise their present personal bearing. It is the voice of God that says—

"Come out from among them and be ye separate . . ."

Shall we hesitate to respond to the invitation because of the present inconvenience it entails? That same voice says—"*give diligence to make your calling and election sure . .*

Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.

To him that overcometh will I give power over the nations."

Shall we refuse the earnest service required, and slacken off and grow supine to suit the easy notions of the natural man? Nay, nay. Wise men will join with Joshua when he said: "*Choose ye this day whom ye will serve; as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"