

OF TIME AND ETERNITY

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I like Ecclesiastes. There is no strong doctrine of redemption in the book; many would say it lacks the concept of faith entirely. But that is overstated. There is a sense of faith, as I shall try to show.

What I like about Ecclesiastes is the way he raises the fundamental questions of the meaning of life and probes the basic issue of the reason for existence, so that one is faced with making fundamental choices which require the affirmation of faith.

In the scripture lesson for today we find the basic question of the meaning of life raised in the context of the changing scenes of life. Says the Preacher: "There is a time to be born — a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to get and a time to lose" — and so on until he raises the fundamental question, "What profit does one who works get from all his labor?" What is the point of it all? one might ask. Says the Preacher: "I have seen the travail that God has given the sons of men to be busy with."

It is as he said earlier — it is all a weariness. All men's deeds are an emptiness and chasing the wind. It is like the weary spirit of Macbeth saying, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. ... Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Shakespeare had no faith.

But Ecclesiastes doesn't go this far. He raises the question of the meaning of life in the midst of processes of change. He asks the question whether there is any new thing under the sun. But he does not, like Shakespeare, deny the possibility of a meaning.

This is suggested in the difficult verse which says, "God hath made everything beautiful in His time; also He hath put eternity into man's mind yet so that he can not find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." The New English Bible puts it perhaps more clearly: "God has made everything to suit its time; moreover He has given men a sense of time past and future, but no comprehension of God's work from beginning to end." There is, you see, for the Preacher a purpose, a work that God is making from beginning to end. But man has no comprehension of it. And yet as the revised version puts it, God has put eternity into man's mind. So man has a sense of the eternal behind the changing scene. The problem for Ecclesiastes was to find the eternal in the temporal — he did not reject it out of hand in spite of his questions

And this is the problem for all of us. As the seasons change, the old year passes and a new year begins, as time moves on, what spiritual principle can we hang on to as giving permanence and meaning to our lives?

“Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away; they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.” So goes the old hymn. But surely there is the white radiance of the eternal beyond the dark passage of time. Time, says Plato, is the moving image of eternity. How do we find the eternal in the temporal? How do we find the fundamental spirit that will endure yesterday, today and forever?

“God has given man a sense of time past and the future, but no comprehension of God’s work from beginning to end,” says the Preacher.

This suggests how men do try to find the eternal in the temporal. First of all, they tend to look to the past. The eternal is that which has stood the test of time, we say. The fundamental values must then be found in the past, and the disturbing, changing values of the present must be pushed aside as we recapture the old values, the eternal verities.

This is tempting. The eternal suggests the permanent, the unchanging, that which is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is symbolized by the tablets of the law given to Moses. And where do we find the eternal except in our traditions that have stood the test of time. This is the appeal of the conservative in politics and the fundamentalist in religion. Both involve a rejection of contemporary philosophies and modes of thought.

The problem with this approach is that the eternal cannot be buried in the past. This is the basis of Jesus’ rejection of the Judaism of His day. The eternal spirit of God cannot be frozen in legalistic Phariseeism. You cannot put new wine in old wine skins. You cannot keep on living in the past. It closes our minds to the on-going revelation of God. It blinds us to present duties – “new occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth. They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.” So goes the old hymn by James R. Lowell. And we sense this truth. Focus on the past gives a stability, but as Jesus showed, the past can take on a sanctity which distorts the perspective on the future. And the past, when all is said and done, is past — and as such is related to the symbol of death. For those who live in the past are dead to the possibilities of the present and the promise of the future.

So where do we look for the eternal in time? If not in the past, let us look at the future. There is good Biblical authority for this. After all, the breakthrough of the eternal in time was associated with the future event of the coming of a Messiah, and the promise of the second coming of our Lord would suggest we look to the future for the dawn of the eternal. And this intuitively makes sense. All is change here and now, but then, in the kingdom to come, the changeless, immortal spirit of the eternal will rule, when God’s final purpose is accomplished.

But this view has problems. If the eternal is that which is basically real, then the future is least like eternity — because the future is the temptation to dream and illusion — the great by and by which will cure all our ills. There is a temptation to look in the future for the end of the rainbow, but it can lead to fatal procrastination in religion, waiting for the Lord instead of doing His bidding. It encourages false dreaming, empty resolutions. And when we stop to think of it, so many of our sins — greed, lust, revenge — are pointed toward future gratification. The problem with looking to the future for salvation is like the problem of the boy who keeps planning on

what he's going to do when he grows up — after he grows up. That is, perennially planning on the future, just as relying on the past, blinds us to our duty for today.

No, strangely enough, the mode of time most like the eternal is not the past, nor the future, but the present. Where time and eternity intersect, the mode is always now, and always personal, in the religious consciousness. When the vision of the eternal breaks through, it is always in present consciousness. When the spirit of God shines into our lives to reveal the power of the spirit, to show how the earthly can reveal a meaning that is more than earthly, when the vehicle of the material expresses the power of the spiritual, the time is always now.

And this is terribly important to remember. We must savor the spiritual possibilities of the present, not live in the past, or for the future, if we are to catch a sense of the life eternal. And this found in the simple things of life — in love, in trust, in beauty. How important it is to treasure the moments God gives us to live for today — rather than to live in past regrets or vain hopes.

And this, I think, was the urging of Jesus. There was an urgency about His message. Now is the time of the Lord. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent — discard the past, don't wait for the future. The kingdom of heaven is within you, in the midst of you. Not here in some past or there in some future. Now is the time of the Lord.

It seems to me that this is the answer to the problem of Ecclesiastes. We have a sense of the past and the future — often regrets about the past and anxieties about the future. And no one comprehends God's purposes.

But we do have in Jesus Christ a revelation by faith of the nature of God. We do have in Jesus Christ an example of the power of God transforming the earthly and temporal to the spiritual and eternal. We do have in the Lord's Supper, in the service of the Communion, a reminder and a promise that that same power can work in us and through us to give us in time some sense of the life eternal. Let us then come to the table of the Lord in the earnest expectation that we can leave with a closer walk with Christ in the kingdom of God, that the white radiance of the eternal can break through the shadows of our temporal lives.