

THAT WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

I am amazed at the variety of things that are offered to us every day to help us find the secret of successful living. Magazine articles by the dozens tell us how to cope with various problems; TV commercials -- dozens to a program it seems -- bombard us, telling us how to be successful in life, or at least how to look successful even if we really are not, health clubs offer us saunas and whirlpool baths to relax us so we can face life with equanimity; while various kinds of drugs are available to turn us on, turn us off, take us out, or whatever.

All this is evidence of the universal search for the secret of enjoyment of life. Billions of dollars are spent every day on this quest. That is the very quest that the book of Ecclesiastes tells us about. The greatest experiment ever performed in the history of mankind to test the various approaches to success, enjoyment or contentment in life is recorded in this 3,000 year old book.

We now have come to the third chapter, which describes the combination of opposites in our experience. We read, for instance, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Verse 4). Throughout this chapter the idea is propounded that there is an appropriate time for all of life's experiences. Have you ever laughed at the wrong time? I have. I was at a funeral once, and the leader asked all present to stand upon their feet. One of my friends whispered to me, "What else could you stand on?" I broke up -- and it was very obviously the wrong time to do so. Ron Ritchie won a kind of immortality for himself at Dallas Theological Seminary when, on the day of graduation, that most solemn occasion in educational life, he walked down the aisle, dressed in his sombre graduation robe, holding a coffee cup in his hand. He is remembered in the annals of Dallas Seminary as a man who did not know the appropriate action for a certain time.

There is an appropriate time for everything, the unpleasant as well as pleasant experiences. That is the argument of Ecclesiastes 3. This is not merely a description of what happens in life, it is a description of what God sends. Many of us are familiar with Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws, the first of which is, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." When talking to someone about his relationship with God, that is an appropriate place to begin. That is the plan that is set forth here. All along, the Searcher, the author of this book, is saying that God desires to bring joy into human experience. Many people think Ecclesiastes is a book of gloom and pessimism because, on the level of the writer's limitations -- which, he says, are, "under the sun," i.e., the visible things of life -- his findings are gloomy and pessimistic. But that is not the message of the book. God intends us to have joy and his program to bring it about includes all these opposites.

If you look carefully you will see that these eight opening verses gather around three major divisions which correspond, amazingly enough, to the divisions of our humanity: body, soul, and spirit. The first four pairs deal with the body:

**For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up; {Eccl 3:1-3 RSV}**

Notice how truly those apply to the physical life. None of us asked to be born; it was something done to us, apart from us. None of us ask to die; it is something done to us by God. So this is the way we should view this list of opposites, as a list of what God thinks we ought to have. It begins by pairing birth and death as the boundaries of life, "under the sun."

The next pair deals with the supply of food: "A time to plant and a time to harvest." Everything must come in its appropriate time. If you get it out of synch you are in trouble. Try to plant a crop in the middle of winter when snow is on the ground and it will not grow. Half of the problem of life is that we are constantly trying to run this schedule ourselves. But God has already planned the schedule. There is an appropriate time for everything.

There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." That may sound strange to us, but the process of dying goes right along with the process of living. Doctors tell us that every seven years all the cells in our bodies die. But our bodies do not die. What you are now is not what you were seven years ago, yet you are the same. Man's physical body is one of the miracles of human history. As the psalmist says, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made." How can we understand the fact that each cell seems to pass on to the cell which replaces it the memory of the past so that, even though our brain cells have changed, the memory goes back beyond the life of the cell itself? There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." God brings it to pass.

There is "a time to break down, and a time to build up." Youth is the time for building up. Muscles grow, abilities increase, coordination gets better. Then, if you hang on long enough as I have and you reach that 65th milestone, there is a time when

everything starts to fall apart -- "a time to break down." Type gets smaller and smaller, steps get higher and higher, trains go faster and faster, people speak in lower and lower tones -- "a time to break down." But that is appropriate. We should not fight it. It is not evil, it is right. God has determined this, and no matter what we may think about it, it is going to continue that way. That is what this is telling us.

Then the Searcher moves into the realm of the soul, with its functions of thinking, feeling and choosing, the social areas, and all the interrelationships of life that flow from that. Verse 4:

**a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance. {Ecc 3:4 RSV}**

All these things follow closely, and they are all appropriate. No one is going to escape the hurts and sorrows of life, is what he is saying here. God chose them for us. The proof of that is when God's own Son came. He was not handed a beautiful life with everything pleasant and delightful, free from struggle and pain. No, he was, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," {Isa 53:3b}. In a fallen world it is right that there will be times of hurt, of sorrow and weeping.

But there will be times too when it is right to laugh, to be happy and carefree. There is a time of grief and tears, "a time to mourn," but there is a time to celebrate and to enjoy a festive occasion. Jesus attended the celebration of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. He entered into it and even provided part of the feast.

Then there is "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together," {Ecc 3:5a RSV}. There is a time to break things down, and a time to build them up again. This particularly has to do with our social structures, our relationships with others. There is a time when we need to embrace others, to show our support for them. But there is a time when we ought to refuse to embrace them, when our support would be misunderstood and would be tantamount to complicity with something evil. Those times come from the hand of God.

The last six of these opposites relate to the spirit, to the inner decisions, the deep commitments. There is "a time to seek [work, marriage, new friends], and a time to lose," {Ecc 3:6a RSV}. There comes a time in life when we should curtail certain friendships, or change our jobs, for instance, and lose what we had in the past. It is proper and appropriate that these times should come.

There is "a time to keep and a time to cast away," {Ecc 3:6b RSV}. There are values and standards which must never be surrendered, while there are other times when we need to throw away things -- clean out the attic, the garage, throw away the old clothes, etc. This is true of habits and attitudes at times. Resentments need to be thrown away. Grudges and long-standing hurts need to be forgiven and forgotten.

There is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak," {Ecc 3:7b RSV}. There are times when we know something, a piece of gossip, and we should not say it; we ought not to speak. There are times when we ought to speak, when something we are keeping secret would deliver someone or bring truth into a situation; a time to speak up.

There is "a time to love, and a time to hate," {Ecc 3:8a RSV}. When is it time to hate? Think of young Abraham Lincoln the first time he saw human beings sold on the slave blocks in New Orleans. He felt hatred rising in his heart. He resolved that if he ever got a chance to smash slavery he would do so. Lincoln's hatred of slavery was perfectly appropriate. There is "a time to love," when it is right that we should extend our love to somebody who is hurting, someone who is feeling dejected or rejected, lonely or weak.

There is "a time for war, and a time for peace," {Ecc 3:8b RSV}. We ought to remember this as we consider some of the issues before us today. When tyranny rides roughshod over the rights of men there is a time when a nation properly makes war. But there is a time when war is absolutely the wrong thing, when no provocation should be allowed to start one because war can explode into violence far beyond anything demanded by a particular situation. How much is permitted in that regard is a perfectly moot subject, one that is being widely debated today.

I point out that all of this is God's wonderful plan for your life. The problem, of course, is that it is not our plan for our life. If we were given that right we would have no unpleasantness at all in life. But that would ruin us. God knows that people who are protected from everything almost invariably end up being impossible to live with; they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, unprincipled. God sends these things in order that we might be taught. There is a time for everything, the Searcher says.

But more than that, if God has a time for everything he also has a purpose in everything, as this next passage declares. Verse 9:

What gain has the worker from his toil? {Ecc 3:9 RSV}

What is "left over" to provide a permanent sense of satisfaction after the momentary pleasure is extracted from some pleasurable

experience? That is the question with which the Searcher examines everything. He has already asked it three times in this book. The answer follows:

I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. {Ecll 3:10 RSV}

Life itself is going to hide the secret. The purpose of these things is found by careful, thoughtful examination, as he has been making all along.

Now he gives us that answer. He found three things. First,

He has made everything beautiful in its time; {Ecll 3:11a RSV}

We have already looked at that. Everything is appropriate and helpful to us, what appears to be the negative as well as the positive. These are not curses and obstacles; they are God's blessings, deliberately provided by him.

Even our enemies are a blessing. I received a letter from a businessman friend of mine in Dallas, a very thoughtful man, giving me his thinking along this line. He said that there were five types of people whom he had learned from in life, "heroes, models, mentors, peers and friends." He continues:

I have added another: Enemies. They have a very important place in our lives. Jumping into the deep water first, I suggest they can provide meaning, much as the poor do for Mother Theresa. Enemies are the opposite bank of our existence. We define our position partly by theirs, as light is the opposite of darkness, of course. They plumb the depth of our Christian maturity, exposing our self-centeredness, self-righteousness and arrogance. They attack and expose our motive, for seldom do we form an enemy out of a mere mistake of fact or even opinion. Enemies are personal, not positional. Therefore, as a personal matter we are commanded to love them. This command is like a spiritual thermometer stuck into the depths of our feverish little souls. It is so interesting that the Jewish historian and sociologist Hart puts this command as the greatest difference between Christianity and all other world religions.

"Love your enemies," Jesus said {Matt 5:44, Luke 6:27}, because they are valuable to you. They do something for you that you desperately need. Our problem is that we have such a shallow concept of things. We want everything to be smooth and pleasant. More than that, we want to be in charge, we want to limit the term of hurt or pain. But God will not allow us to take his place and be in charge.

There is a rhythm to life which even secular writers recognize. The book, *Passages*, speaks of the various experiences we pass through as we grow through life.

The second thing the Searcher learned in his search is,

... also he has put eternity into man's mind, [or literally, "man's heart"] {Ecll 3:11b RSV}

There is a quality about life, about humanity, that can never be explained by the rationale of evolution. No animal is restless and dissatisfied when its physical needs have been met. Observe a well fed dog sleeping before the fire on a cold day. He is with his family, enjoying himself, not worried about anything. Put a man in that position and pretty soon he will feel a sense of restlessness. There is something beyond, something more he is crying out for.

This endless search for an answer beyond what we can feel or sense in our physical and emotional needs is what is called here "eternity in man's heart." St. Augustine said, "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they learn to rest in Thee." Man is the only worshipping animal. What makes him different cannot be explained by evolutionary procedure. He is different because he longs for the face of God. C.S. Lewis said, "Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but he takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home." There is a longing for home, there is a call deep in the human spirit for more than life can provide. This itch which we cannot scratch is part of God's plan.

The third thing which the Searcher learned is that mystery yet remains:

... yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. {Ecll 3:11c RSV}

We are growing in our knowledge, but we discover that the more we know the more we know we do not know. The increase of knowledge only increases the depth of wonder and of delight. In the sovereign wisdom of God we cannot solve all mysteries. As the Apostle Paul put it, "we see through a glass darkly," {1 Cor 13:12 KJV}; we are looking forward to the day when we shall see face-to-face.

We cannot know all the answers to all the conundrums and enigmas of life. That is why the exhortation of Scripture is always that we must trust the revelation of a Father's wisdom in areas we cannot understand. Jesus said over and over that the life of faith is like that of a child. A little child in his father's arms is unaware of many things that his father has learned. But, resting in the father's arms, he is quite content to let those enigmas unfold as he grows, trusting in the wisdom of his father. That is the life of faith, and that is what we are to do in our experience.

In Verses 12-15 we learn the purpose of God in this remarkable plan. Three things are found here. First,

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; {Eccl 3:12 RSV}

Yes, everybody agrees with that. That is what the commercials tell us: "Live life with gusto. You only go around once. Seize it now." All right. The Searcher says so too.

Secondly, he says,

also that it is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. {Eccl 3:13 RSV}

Underline the words, "take pleasure." That is what the Searcher finds that man cannot produce. Things in themselves give a momentary, not lasting, pleasure. True enjoyment is the gift of God, it is what God wants. That is what the Searcher has been arguing all along.

What a different picture this is of life under the sovereign Lordship of a Living God from what most people think God is like! I saw a book on sex the other day entitled, "Designed for Pleasure." That is true. But it is not merely sex that is designed for pleasure, all things are designed for human pleasure. If you think the thing in question is going to produce lasting pleasure, however, you will miss it. The secret is that it is the knowledge of God in that relationship that produces enjoyment. God wants it so. We are not in the grasp of the Great Cosmic Joykiller, as many people seem to view God. God delights in human enjoyment.

The third thing the Searcher says is that it all must be discovered by realizing that God is in charge and he will not bend his plan for anyone. Verse 14:

I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, {Eccl 3:14a RSV}

God has sovereignly, independently, set up the plan of life in a way that we cannot interfere with. He has done so, in order that men should fear before him.

All through the Bible we read that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," {Psa 111:10, Prov 9:10}. Until a man recognizes and trusts the superior wisdom of God he has not begun to fear God. This fear is not abject terror of God, it is respect and honor for him. If you attempt to live your life without the recognition of God, ultimately you will find yourself, as the Searcher found himself, empty, dissatisfied and restless, feeling that life is miserable and meaningless. The secret of life is the presence of God himself.

Most of the struggle of life comes from us wanting to play God ourselves, wanting to be in charge of what happens to us. That is true even of Christians. When God refuses to go along we sulk and pout and get angry with him. We throw away our faith and say, "What's the use? I tried it but it doesn't work." What a foolish statement! God will not surrender his prerogatives. "Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it -- God has made it so in order that men should fear before him."

This is taught us through many repetitions. Verse 15:

That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. {Eccl 3:15 RSV}

A better translation of that last phrase is, "God brings back what has already passed away."

The Searcher is here referring to the repetition of the lessons of life. We do not seem to learn these very well. I have learned some lessons in life and said, "Lord, I see what you are after. I've got it now. You don't have to bring this one back again." Down the road, however, I make the same mistake again. Some circumstance painfully recalls to mind what I had once seen as a principle in life. I have to come with hat in hand and say, "Lord, I'm a slow learner. Have patience with me." God says, "I understand. I'm prepared to have patience with you and teach you this over and over and over again until you get it right." Have you found life to be like that? The Searcher tells us that he too had to learn this.

That is the Searcher's thesis. God desires us to learn the secret of enjoyment. That enjoyment will not come from a variety of experiences. Those will bring but momentary pleasure, but not the secret of contentment, of continual enjoyment.

A plaque on my bedroom wall which I read every morning says,

No thought is worth thinking
that is not the thought of God.
No sight is worth seeing
unless it is seen through his eyes.
No breath is worth breathing
without thanks to the One
whose very breath it is.

Verse 16 of Chapter 3 begins a section which runs through Chapter 5, in which a series of objections to this thesis are examined by the Searcher. I am not going to cover all of it this morning, but will take just one objection which occurs here in Chapter 3.

Someone says, "Wait a minute. You say that God has a wonderful plan for my life, that he is a God of justice, but last week I was seeking justice in a courtroom and I found that the cards were stacked against me; all I got was the rawest injustice. How do you square that with this 'wonderful plan for my life?'" The Searcher takes this up, Verse 16:

Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. {Ecc1 3:16 RSV}

Human courts are designed to correct injustice, but they are often filled with wickedness and injustice. Just last week I was a witness in a case in which a man's business was being destroyed by legal maneuverers. Everyone knew this was unjust, but because of certain legalities no one could get hold of the matter to correct it. That kind of injustice creates anger and frustration in many hearts. People say, "What do you mean, I am to accept that as from the hand of God?"

The Searcher picks that up and says there are three things he wants to show us about it. First,

I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. {Ecc1 3:17 RSV}

Though there is injustice, that is not the end of the story. God may correct it even within time, and if he does not do so "in time," still he has appointed a time when it all will be brought out. The Scriptures speak of a time appointed by God when all the hidden motives of the heart will be examined, when "that which is spoken in secret shall be shouted from the housetops" {cf, Matt 10:27, Luke 12:3}, and justice will ultimately prevail. That is what this Searcher says. Injustice is limited in its scope.

Second,

I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts. {Ecc1 3:18 RSV}

In other words, there is a beastly quality about all of us which injustice will bring out. What is it about a man that makes him prey upon even his friends or neighbors?

On the TV program, *The People's Court*, the other night, one case concerned a young woman who had gotten angry at her friend and roommate, whom she had known for years. and in her anger had poured sugar into the woman's car's gas tank, absolutely destroying the engine. The judge was appalled at the vindictive spirit of this attractive looking young woman who had acted in such a vicious way. There is a beastliness about us all. Put in a situation where we are suffering injury we react with viciousness. God allows certain circumstances to show us that we all have that quality about us.

We are like animals in other ways, too, the Searcher says. Verse 19:

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; [not Hell; he is talking about the grave] all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. {Ecc1 3:19-20 RSV}

Man is frail, his existence temporary. Like the animals, we do not have very long to live on this earth. Injustice sharpens the realization that we do not have long to live rightly, honestly and truly before God. We die like an animal and our bodies dissolve like a beast's. From the human standpoint one cannot detect any difference. That is what the Searcher says in Verse 21:

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? {Ecll 3:21 RSV}

That really should not be a question, as it is stated here in this text. It should read this way: "Who knows that the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth."

That is something which only revelation tells us. Experience does not offer any help at all here. From a human standpoint, a dead man and a dead dog look as if the same thing happened to both of them. But from the divine point of view that is not the case. Though we die like beasts, the spirit of man goes upward while the spirit of the beast goes downward. Later on the Searcher states very positively that at death the spirit of man returns to God who gave it, but the spirit of the beast ends in nothingness. Injustice stems from our beastliness, and God's plan for life will uncover it.

Finally, he concludes in Verse 22:

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; [But remember, enjoyment comes only from God. Then he adds the question] who can bring him to see what will be after him? {Ecll 3:22 RSV}

He does not answer that question here; he leaves it hanging. The answer, of course, is that only God can help us to understand what lies beyond life.

The wonderful thing to extract from this passage is the great truth that God wants us to learn how to handle life in such a way that we can rejoice in any and every circumstance, as the Scriptures exhorts us. Recognize that all comes from a wise Father. Though circumstances bring us pain as well as pleasure, it is his choice for us. Rejoice that in the midst of the pain there is the possibility of pleasure.

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