

Explore: What's the Answer?

August 9, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Aug. 25 focuses on Ecclesiastes 11:1-5, 9-10; 12:13-14.*

This final section of Ecclesiastes pulls everything together in an attempt to give closure, though not necessarily simply. Instead, Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, is concerned with how to move forward in life, even if airtight answers are not available.

The first part of this section involves our actions. Often, we want to know the “bottom line,” or “where the rubber meets the road.” In other words, we want to know what we should do about the circumstances that confront us. Ecclesiastes gives us something of an answer: “Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land” (11:2).

This sounds like the old proverb, “Don’t put all your eggs into one basket.” Certainly there is wisdom in this statement, but there is also more to be said. Qoheleth’s emphasis on diversifying one’s efforts is not aimed at having the best overall growth in one’s investment portfolio. Instead, no one knows what course life will take: “As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things” (v. 5).

The instability of existence

The instability of human existence is not for human beings to understand, yet when we do experience its twists and turns, we must remember God is somewhere behind it. While the world is plagued by sin, this does not remove God’s good governance from the equation. So what should be done? We should move forward with the risk-taking that is part and parcel

of living as human beings, even if some of those risks ultimately fail.

For this reason, Ecclesiastes sees tremendous advantage to being young, and young people are advised to “be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth” (v. 9). Since life involves taking risks—whether through financial investments, education for a specific career, marriage, child-raising or employment relocation—young people are in a better spot since they can take more risks and have more time to see what results emerge.

At the same time, young people often do not have the experience to know the best decision. Nonetheless, these actions will be judged by God, so they should be taken with care and consideration. So, no matter our age, Ecclesiastes gestures towards enjoying life to the fullest under God’s care.

All is meaningless

The latter half of this passage brings Ecclesiastes full circle and serves as the conclusion for the entire book. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth has emphasized the meaninglessness of virtually all human activity and values. Pleasure is meaningless. Wealth is meaningless. Even godliness and righteousness are meaningless with regard to delaying death.

While he has hinted wisdom still is a better path, he declares it much more firmly here: “Fear God and keep the commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil” (12:13-14).

Some readers of Ecclesiastes see this as a simple blanket that covers the turmoil we observed in earlier chapters. Instead, we should see these concluding words as in tension with what one commentator calls Qoheleth’s “troubled restlessness.” This may in fact move us closer to answering life’s great questions, not by giving us neat and tidy responses, but by opening up the possibility to move on with life in faithfulness to

God—fearing/respecting God and keeping the commandments.

Love God, love neighbor

For Christians, this reference to commandments should remind us that all the Old Testament law is summed up by love of God and love of neighbor. Thus, whenever we sense that life's circumstances are pressing us down, we know what to do and how to live—in Christ-like love of God and service to others.

In conclusion, Ecclesiastes as a whole draws from the depth of the wisdom tradition in advising readers to “fear God,” a phrase that also appears in Job and Proverbs. As has been mentioned in earlier passages, wisdom is not simply concerned about living, but living well in the midst of good times and bad. Let Qoheleth's words encourage us along this path.