

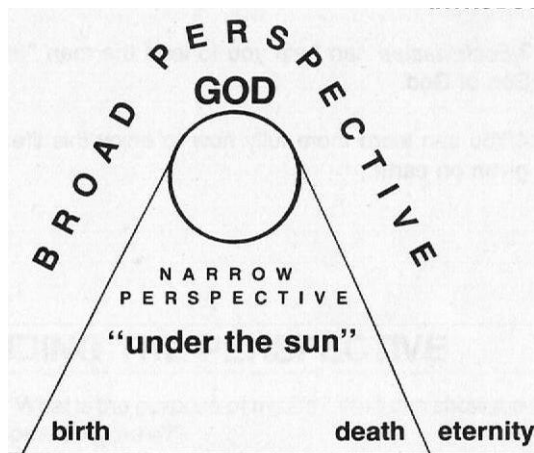
Standing In Awe Of God

Series on the "Ecclesiastes"

The book of Ecclesiastes contains a mixture of observations of life lived both in relation to God, and a life lived under the sun, or without reference to him. All through this book, which is really the diary of one man's observations about life, we hear the conclusions about a man who had the ability to do, see and know everything he wanted to experience in life. King Solomon, the wealthiest man on earth in his time, tells us of these life experiences, and of his conclusions.

The problem is, his conclusions seem to be all over the place. Much of the time, he concludes that life is meaningless. But occasionally, there are flashes of real wisdom. His vision alternates between a narrow perspective on life, and a broad perspective. His narrow perspective is when he sees his existence from only what he can see and experience from an earthly viewpoint. He uses this phrase "under the sun" 29 times in this book, which is the way he describes life from a human standpoint. It's a reference to the way life on earth looks when you don't take God into account. The phrase isn't used anywhere else in the Bible. But it has its parallels in Exodus 17:14 where the Lord says to Moses that he will blot out the memory of the Amalek from "under heaven". When the children of Israel made a golden calf to worship, Deuteronomy 9:14 tells us that God wanted to blot out their name from "under heaven". The earthly perspective, or the under the sun perspective, is a narrow view. It's seeing things from a human viewpoint, leaving God out of the equation. The broad perspective comes about when we walk by faith, and we include the God of eternity in our view. It's when we include the character and purposes of God in our assessment of the events of life, that we find meaning. If it helps you to understand, I've put it in a diagram.

Diagram of the "Under The Sun" Perspective.



Today, I want us to look at one of the conclusions about life from this book which is an "over the sun", or broad perspective. He arrived at these conclusions by going to the house of God and watching people worship.

Here's what he said about worship:

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it.

***He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfil it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God."* (Ecclesiastes 5:1 – 5:7)**

There were four different sorts of people Solomon saw when he watched people at worship.

- **The Unprepared.**

He found people coming to worship who weren't prepared to meet with the living God. They hadn't guarded their steps. They hadn't prepared themselves. They just cruised on in with their mind on other things, maybe arriving late. When Solomon talks about guarding our steps he isn't talking about watching the footpath. He's talking about preparing our hearts to meet with the God of all the earth. So Solomon says to us "Stay alert. Be prepared. You're going to meet with God today. Watch out! Get ready!"

Annie Dillard wrote a book called "Teaching The Stones To Talk" This is what she wrote "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."

Merrilyn Withers is a colleague of mine who has worked most of her life as a Youth Consultant. It takes a wedding or a funeral to get her out of a pair of jeans and a T shirt. She tells the story of a time she was invited to a garden party. She got caught up with a crowd of dignitaries and found herself walking down a line of very important people. Because she was on unfamiliar territory, she decided to ham it up a bit. She came to this man and said to him "You look familiar. I know you from somewhere. Go on – tell me who you are". He said to her in rather frosty tones "Madam – I'm the Governor General!" Unfortunately, she didn't believe him. "Nah, go on, you having me on!" When the truth dawned on her that he really was the most important person in the country, (being the Queen of England's representative) she said she just wanted to curl up and die! Sometimes we do that with God. We clown our way in to the presence of the King of Kings and call it worship. Worship is a dangerous act. Approaching the living God is like playing with dynamite.

What else did Solomon see?

- **The Talkers**

He found people who talked rather than listened. People who were more keen to talk to each other than listen to God. I'm always impressed by people who come early to worship God. They sit quietly – pray quietly, read scripture, meditate and still their hearts before the living God. It's a practice we could all learn from. Generally evangelicals don't know how to handle silence in worship. We have to fill up silent spaces with words and music. Yet the scriptures tell us that the Lord says "Be still and know that I am God". Perhaps we fill our silences with talk because we are afraid that God might speak, and we might not like what we hear. Solomon says to us "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few".

Solomon discovered another group of people.

- **The Day Dreamers.**

That's what verse three of Chapter 5 is referring to. People who are going through the motions but their mind is somewhere else. On a business contract – on tomorrow's exam– or on their Sunday supper.

When our minds are somewhere else God's truth doesn't find an anchor point. Worship actually requires our concentration. It demands our full attention. Sometimes I wonder if we actually think about, or believe the words we say, and pray and sing. Here is a song we used to sing a lot when I was younger;

"I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold, I'd rather be His than have riches untold, I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land, I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hands." Wow! Really? Or what about this one?

"Jesus, lover of my soul, Jesus, I will never let you go. You've taken me from the miry clay, set my feet upon the rock, and now I know - I love You, I need You, though my world will fall I'll never let You go. My Saviour, my closest friend, I will worship You until the very end."

That's pretty powerful stuff! I'm not saying we shouldn't sing those things, but when we are singing, or praying or speaking out declarations of our faith, it's no time for day dreaming. We need to keep our brain engaged. We need to think about what we are doing.

The fourth thing Solomon found was

- **The Promise Makers.**

People who promised God all sorts of things and never followed through on them. Would Solomon find the same thing here? Yes Lord I promise to make time with my kids top priority. I promise to stay true to my marriage vows. I promise to bring up my children in the Christian faith. I promise to deal with my impure thought life. I promise to stay morally pure until I'm married. I promise to tithe my income.

I promise Lord! I vow! I'm going to do it! Promises never fulfilled. It's said that the road to hell is paved with broken promises.

Solomon concluded that we'd better stand in awe of God, because every promise we have made God remembers. We had better stand in awe of God because he knows every day dream we've had when we have pretended to be worshipping or pretended to be listening. We had better stand in awe of God because he knows about the times we've spoken foolish words and come unprepared for worship.

We had better stand in awe of God and take him seriously and not play games with Him.

The journal of Solomon that we call the book of Ecclesiastes is the diary of an old man who wasted much of his life pursuing meaningless things. Don't wait until you're old before you discover the purpose of life. You don't have to be old before you learn to stand in awe of God.

Today I'm going to conclude by reading part of a letter from a Pastor and his wife. Their names are Maurice and Miriam Atkinson. I'd love to read it all, but there isn't time. I'm reading this letter, because it shows the power of one life dedicated to God. Maurice is writing about the death of their youngest daughter Caroline. She was 17 years old. Caroline stood in awe of God. This is how it reads;

"Caroline had been complaining of vision blackouts for some months. The doctor checked and could find nothing wrong. We finally referred her to a specialist who noticed swelling in the optic nerve. She was referred to a neurosurgeon, scans were taken, and a tumour discovered at the centre of her brain. We learnt on the Monday that she had a tumour, and it was most likely malignant. The operation was set down for the Friday morning following. It was somewhat of a shock, but all of us had a tremendous peace over the situation (including Caroline). We just knew God was in control.

However after leaving Caroline that day we both wept in the car, fully knowing that we were facing the unthinkable. We all hoped she would be healed but as I had discussed with her, God had not spoken about healing; only to trust Him and everything would be alright. You always believe for life in these situations. We had happy times together as a family during the week. We all talked and said all the things people wished they had said if they had had a chance. She had been told by the doctors in the long term she had no chance of a long life. I was proud of her courage and maturity. The peace of God was upon her and she never wept or felt sorry for herself, only for us or her friends who would miss her.

We saw her at 7 am on the Friday morning and spent an hour with her, talked and kissed her goodbye, not knowing that's what it was to be. The operation was a complete success. She was recovering and spoke a few words before sleeping again. At 3 am Saturday morning we were called in to the hospital. She had fallen into a coma. A scan had picked up a haemorrhage. She went back into theatre.

Once again the operation was successful. She was transferred to intensive care and sedated heavily, so life support was needed. They were wanting her to keep still.

The surgeon was very positive and we all breathed a sigh of relief. All went well until 2 am Sunday morning when we were called again. Her brain was swelling but they could find nothing wrong apart from a deep coma. We had a tremendous peace on us despite seeing her vital signs seemingly out of control.

When we called Sunday morning she was deeply unconscious and there was no response to stimuli.

She was declared brain dead at 9 am approx on Sunday the 17th May.

They kept her on life support till late afternoon as we gave her kidneys. The word spread. Family and friends gathered. Over 20 of Caroline's High School friends came into the hospital and saw her and said their goodbyes. Over 50 gathered round her bed at 4 pm. We sang, 'There is a Redeemer', read Psalm 121, prayed and left her to the Lord whom she loved.

If it wasn't for the fact that my daughter had died I would describe the experience of being present when one of Gods saints went to be with Him as beautiful. The specialist who formally asked for her kidneys after the final examination was quite overcome by the expressions of love by so many young people for Caroline. He said 'We are not used to this sort of thing in intensive care'. Despite our tears and sorrow in our hearts death was surely swallowed up in victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God inspired us we believe to run the funeral as a wedding, for the Bible teaches us that Christ is the believers' bridegroom. He clothes His bride in white garments of righteousness. She wore her mothers wedding gown. We held the service in the Town Hall, with over 600 in attendance. Her peers carried her in to a trumpet solo. We opened in song with 'Oh Lord You're Beautiful'. People including teachers, friends, relatives paid tribute. I spoke about her as a daughter. A group sang the old Seekers number 'Turn Turn' (There is a Season) Peter Morrow spoke, we sang 'There is a Redeemer', and to a trumpet fanfare her uncles carried her out. The trumpet led the last verse 'When I stand in glory I will see His face...' It was a very moving, victorious, God glorifying worship service.

From the comments people have since made, many have been very challenged by Caroline's life, her courage and her depth of faith, for one so young. She was a popular girl and it has been heart warming to see many of her friends coming into church and inquiring about Christianity. You could not help but be challenged by her life, especially the dairy entry which we have enclosed. This was her hour and her time, Gods time. We have no doubt of this, and although we miss her terribly, and our house is now empty, there is no pain or regret. Gods grace and love has been incredible enabling us to so far accept the situation totally.

The lead up to this began last December when Caroline really determined that Jesus would be Lord of her life and started to walk with God in earnest. She wrote to friends at University telling them of her love for Jesus, and how much she was enjoying church and the Bible. In one letter she discussed death and how she was not afraid to die, and if she did to rejoice because she would be in a much better place. Miriam commented at the time that Caroline was in revival and she sure was, praise God.

She was gifted academically, a top art student, although the youngest girl in the class, was the obvious leader and very popular. The teachers said she mothered some of the others who were struggling. One girl she nursed through a difficult family time and led her out of occult involvement to where she came to Christ at the funeral. Her dying wish to me was 'Dad if I die and my friends come to Christ it would have been worth it'. At the time I thought it was a strange thing to say but obviously she was more in touch with the situation than I was. Our prayer is to see Caroline's desire come true.

We cling so tightly to this life. We spend most of our time preparing for careers which last a brief time, or save for our retirement etc but so little time is spent preparing for the greatest journey of all. As natural people we think, what a waste of a young life – she never married, saw the world, developed her talents fully, but in Gods mind she was a complete and total success. She had come to a point in her life where she prepared her life to serve God, had yielded herself fully to His will. When her soul was required of her she was ready to go.

Two days before Caroline died she wrote: "Well according to medical science I am never going to grow old. I have a year in the least to live. I have brain surgery tomorrow to remove as much of a malignant tumour as possible. But God has promised me He is in charge and He is the one who can heal me. I believe it may be gone when they go to remove it, Amen! Or perhaps His purpose is different and I have to go through more to continue His plans. I have a purpose. I am not going to die, God is in control. I would love to catch sight of the glory of God only to return to lead my friends to the Lord. Oh! If only, please God let me.

Lead my paths and help me to live and honour You in everything I do, and bring glory to Your name. Please help me have the peace I now do in You, to pull me through. For that I may honour You and bring others to get to know You. Let that be my purpose yes please oh God take my life.

You are the potter I am the clay, mould me make me, this is what I pray.

YOU ALONE ARE MIGHTY AND POWERFUL.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland