

Why Are We Waiting?

When searching through the Old Testament, we prefer those stories where God is shaking up the old man Moses with a burning bush, surprising Joshua and his desert-wearied citizen soldiers with the unbelievable collapse of Jericho's walls, or when Solomon builds the amazing temple for God in Jerusalem. We like epic stories of success and miraculous conclusions.



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Then we crash into this book that is unlike any other writings of the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes is devoid of simplistic "perform well and get the reward" formulas, disinterested in privilege and prosperity as the goal of living, and determined to do the right things in spite of the inequities of life. So, hold on as the "preacher" or "teacher" pushes us beyond pretty words and promises.

Dr. Huber Drumwright, my friend and mentor from Southwestern Seminary days advised me when I was trying to discern God's will in a career choice: "Cast your bread on the waters, Michael, and the answer will come back to you." It is human nature to have all the facts and a clear plan before making a major choice to set your life on the path of success. You can spend your whole life trying to explain and never discovering the joys of life, never really living and growing. The "preacher" has no illusions about the "secret" of life, but he understands there are wonders and possibilities in God's gift of life.

My first two churches were in rural Oklahoma and a very small farm town in west Texas. The majority of those church families were big-time farmers, raising wheat and cattle. They lived constantly with the possibility of a storm destroying a wheat crop before it could be harvested or a drop in beef prices. When the commercial harvesters were due to begin early Monday morning, those farmers spent a lot of

time Sunday afternoon watching the sky and praying no storm clouds would appear. They taught me to do your best, plan for the possibilities, and trust God no matter what happens.

So, the "preacher" says, "Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth" (v. 2). There are inevitable problems in this world, so you have a choice of waiting for the worst or living for the best, so get with it! You will harvest nothing if you don't plant. You can fret about clouds and wait too long to sow your crops, but that is just dumb! (v. 4). I like this man's no-nonsense philosophy. Why are you waiting, while life passes by?

This stuff used to be called real-life wisdom. The writer gets beyond easy promises to confront any inequities of life and move forward. Life happens. Clouds produce rain. When trees fall, no matter the direction, there they lie. For all we know about conception and the development of a child in the womb, a baby's birth is still mysterious and wonderful. We may recognize a powerful event as a miracle of God, but we cannot explain it.

However you choose to describe this writer – preacher, sage, ethicist, philosopher – he is definitely a realist. He acknowledges the facts of life, but he trusts God without demanding answers to all his questions. We want the sun to shine, the stock market to stay high, and the Cardinals to win, but reality says you won't get everything you want. There are storms; even the president cannot guarantee profit margins, and baseball games can get rained out.

This is what I call the dilemmas of life: there will always be questions. You can stomp your feet in frustration, argue with God, rage against reality, but the only real option is to live every day, even though "you do not know (understand fully) the work of God, who makes everything" (v. 5).

We want answers, the secret formula

that only God's chosen can know. Did Jesus' disciples understand and accept everything he did and said? No! Furthermore, they voiced their opposition and doubts. They struggled with his disregard of established racial and social divisions, his generosity, his insistence that the cross was God's will, and much more.

The "preacher" says (we) "do not know what disaster may happen on earth" (v. 2). What to do in this state of not knowing? Be smart, diversify, provide for your children, manage what you have, and proceed with this unpredictable life. Examining this challenging text reminds me of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seeds in Matthew 13:3-8. Yes, it is about planting the seed of God's grace in different lives and how those seeds can thrive or die. But there is a common thread of truth: life, whether spiritual transformation or daily living, grows out of accepting or rejecting God's love and guidance. The "preacher" says, "In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, whether both will be good" (v. 6). The spiritual directive is live and let your faith in God be the framework of that living.

Most people remember Ecclesiastes for one frequently quoted verse: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (3:1). Have you ever said to your kids, "Life is not fair"? Maybe you've said it to yourself many times. The "preacher" finishes that statement: life is not fair, so get on with it! Life is about obstacles, surprises, disappointments, and victories, but this preacher says get on with the living, make choices, plan for eventualities, and understand that when all is said and done there is God, whether we can explain it or not.

Do you really believe that sitting around and waiting is better than playing the game of life and discovering the blessings and joys of God's grace? Why are you waiting? Get in the game!