

Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

The Goodness of the Earth in the Light of the Temple

A. Enjoy the Good which God Gives

It is no coincidence that the oppression of the poor and the violent denial of justice and right in the province, are now discussed again (5:8ff.). But it is done on a quieter note than in chapters 3:16 and 4:1. The Teacher has received the temple light. These conditions must now be seen and experienced in the messianic light. The conditions referred to (cf. also 10:5) were common in those days – and not only then. One should not wonder about the injustice and extortions. In a large empire with many provinces and districts (Palestine was then a small part of a large empire) there were many officials, each seeking the best for himself, The officials probably comprised both foreigners and Jew. Above them were higher officials, who were responsible to higher statesmen. They, in turn, were the direct representatives of the foreign prince (cf. the tax collectors in Jesus' time). In vv. 8 and 9 a climax is noticeable. For that reason, v. 9 must be regarded as ironic (or even sarcastic): if, beside all this, you also have a king who lets himself be served by the land (i.e. who claims a large part of the agricultural products for himself – as e.g. when the Germans occupied other lands in World War II), then that is of special advantage to you. It comes down to this: behind this morbid humour there is a deep advent-longing for the coming of the Messiah-King of Psalm 72.

In v. 10 The Teacher apparently wants to lift the oppressed poor in the church out of their misery. They, especially, often love money and look with jealousy upon the rich, who themselves often cannot sleep because of their excessive wealth. The Teacher charges the poor not to covet what they see before them. They should set their hopes, not on uncertain riches, but on God, who speaks his comforting words of revelation in the temple (cf. 1 Timothy 6:6-19).

Compare Proverbs 14:20 with verse 11. The rich man has scarcely anything left, because others lay claim to his possessions. Furthermore, the rich man has many worries which keep him awake at night. You can think of a person who has accumulated wealth, but to his own destruction. Through a bad venture he loses everything at once, and losing something is often worse than never owning it. In any case he cannot leave anything to his son. His life is full of sorrow; first the laborious task of gathering and saving it, and then the sudden loss of all of it.

What The Teacher has said in vv. 8-12 forms the background to what follows in vv. 18-20. The latter verses explain what the earlier ones mean to him. We see the name of God four times in verses 18-20 (cf. 2:24-26). That suggests immediately that we should not expect a shallow optimism for life here. Let everyone in the church enjoy the good, when this is his lot (v. 18). (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-5, where all the emphasis is placed on thanksgiving and on the consecration of all of creation by the Word of God and prayer (concept of office).) If we see that God supplies it, then we are also thankful for little (which is sufficient). See how positively and appreciatively the Bible speaks also of

earthly blessings and benefits. Also those blessings come from above, from the Father of lights. They are proof of God's favour towards his children, and also a guarantee to them that they will receive goods which will never perish. Naturally, every gift from God also brings a command. Thus a man can be glad, even with the little that God gives. However, there are also people to whom God gives special gifts of riches and treasures (cf. 3:12,13). They do not worry about the brevity of their lives and they do not have to either. They live carefree (but not: careless!) lives and delight in the gladness of their hearts. This also is a gift of God, even though he only gives it to some and then only sometimes. A positive acceptance of life is dealt with also here.

B. Be Satisfied with what God Gives

However, there are also completely different situations (6:1ff). God gives someone much wealth, but a stranger enjoys it. The stranger here is a foreign hostile power (cf. Deuteronomy 28:51 and Isaiah 1:7), which preys on the property of the church. The Teacher does not make himself too clear, but a word to the wise is sufficient: this is meaningless, a grievous evil because the believers are the lawful citizens and heirs of the earth (Psalm 104:35; Matthew 5:5). The Teacher does not go into the why of the decree, but he does see God's hand in it; he is not a fatalist (cf. 3:1ff).

One person enjoys the good things in life, while another cannot enjoy them, even though he has a hundred children and lives many years. He never finds rest and, for whatever reason, does not even get a decent burial. (Cf. Job 21:32ff; Isaiah 14:19ff; Jeremiah 16:4, about burials in Israel.) An untimely birth (Job 3:16; Psalm 58:8) is better, since both persons go to the same place, viz., the realm of the dead, and a still-born child arrives there much faster! Moreover, one person finds rest, while another races through life for a thousand years twice over. All the effort of this man (from v. 3) was for his mouth, that is, he works to fulfill all his consuming desires, including his burial, but his desires are not satisfied. In the background still stands the stranger who enjoys all (v. 2).

Verse 8 continues the argument of v. 6 (all go to the same place): what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? (cf. 2:14-16.) Of what use is it to the poor or the disadvantaged man that he knows how to conduct himself rightly, according to God's laws, towards the living? The wise conduct themselves piously, especially in times of oppression. But who thanks them for it? Note that we are talking about the acknowledgment of the work of believers on this side of the grave, which makes an end to everything, and seems to treat all men alike. Oh, that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion! (Psalm 14:7)

The Teacher, in the light of the temple, wants to receive a living out of God's hand. It is better to be happy and satisfied with what God gives than to strive restlessly after what man enjoys but cannot attain. This also is meaningless. Happy is he whose desires and belongings are in harmony (cf. Philippians 4:10-11; Psalm 23).

It is important to note that The Teacher raises the theme of autarchy (having enough, being self sufficient) at this juncture. He can do this better now that he has pointed to God in heaven (5:1), the completely independent and self-sufficient one, who reveals himself

in the temple as the God of Israel, the Shepherd of his sheep (12:11). Because God is self-sufficient, he also will give his oppressed people self-sufficiency. This is to be understood in an objective and in a subjective manner: God gives to every one in the church sufficient so that they can manage, and he also causes them to be satisfied with what they have received - it is really enough for them. This is a blessing which is given in the temple by the reading of and instruction in the law and the prophets. This blessing is the exact opposite of the curse of man's inability to enjoy his material goods.

C. No Criticism of God for what He Gives

In vv. 10-12 the covenant child is put in his place: he is man and it is known what he is. God's sovereignty is emphasized here. Whoever suggests that there is an antithesis or contrast here, fails to recognize God's covenant and the miracle of the revelation in his temple in Jerusalem. The idea that a man cannot conduct a lawsuit against God can also be found in Job 9 (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:14; Job 36:26). God is right. This is not dull submission, but Scriptural faith received in the temple. The temple does not place this faith into discussion, not even in dark times, when justice stumbles in the streets and the church people are prone to accuse God of injustice. In those times the confession of the autarchy of God and the church become invaluable. Then we must keep silent (v. 11), and believe (cf. Isaiah 30:15), because God knows what is good for his people (v. 12). He has everything in his hands and no one knows what will happen after he is gone. All the emphasis here is on God's decree, but here is also a view of his judgment seat (3:17).

Questions

1. Can you see something of the struggle for power in political and social life?
2. Can we say that for the believers earthly blessings are a loan and guarantee of the goods which will never perish? From whom do we get these blessings? (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:4)
3. Show some of the great dangers of materialism. Can you explain why well-being decreases at the same time as material prosperity increases?
4. Was Jesus' charge to the rich young man only for him? (cf. Luke 14:33) How must we explain the words of the Saviour?
5. Does the 10th commandment relate to this part of Scripture? What about Psalm 23?
6. When does one enjoy good? Does that depend on the amount, or on the heart of the one who enjoys?
7. What does the expression "Whatever exists has already been named" in chapter 6:10 mean? How does this text show that The Teacher has been working intensively with the book of Genesis?

8. Talk about the so-called autarchy of the church. What exactly do you mean by it? Does this point have any meaning for the relief of the poor in Christ's church and for the functioning of the office of deacon? Do you think the office of deacon is an important office in the church, or do you think that it has become redundant because of the many welfare programs which exist today? Was the institution of the office of deacon then a last resort (by Christ!), because there was nothing else yet in those days?

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