

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

A Premature Conclusion

A. The Provisional Results Further Tested

It is not true that The Teacher now changes his theme in order to find out what pleasure would bring him. That would be acting like an ostrich, and he does not want to escape reality. But, for him, the question is whether or not he sketched the reality correctly or not. Was the image not too gloomy and therefore biased and unjust? There are also pleasurable things in life, are there not?

So he says to himself: I will make a test of pleasure (i.e. I will see whether pleasure can withstand the test), and then I will inspect what is good. Is it not true that the good in life also has a positive value which must be considered when one formulates one's final conclusions?

Therefore The Teacher exerts himself to cheer his body with wine. Meanwhile, his mind still guides him with wisdom (as mentioned in 1:13). This does not mean that he remains sober, but that the fear of the Lord continues to fill his heart. He performs great things and does not keep his heart away from any pleasure. If pleasure and riches could throw any permanent weight into the balance, then this certainly had to be the case with The Teacher. And indeed, he received some pleasure from these things for a while (v. 10). But when he reaches his conclusion, the result is again: meaningless and chasing after wind, weariness without any result or lasting gain (v. 11). Were one thinks of Solomon who received much wisdom from the Lord and also many possibilities to build up life here on earth and to bring it to glory. In his kingdom a shadow of the messianic kingdom of peace which God had promised was already seen. Just think of all his cultural works and treasures which amazed the world.

In Solomon's days one also saw something of the lost paradise returning. But did that remain? Had a lasting result indeed been achieved? The Teacher must state that the opposite is true. The twisted remains twisted, the lacking is still lacking, and folly (sin) gains the upper hand over wisdom. It seems that new experiments do not open any new perspectives. They do not change the overall image of 1:18. History does not change because of it.

For this reason, he ultimately characterizes these experiments as folly. They do not yield any knowledge with which he can serve the sons of man in God's congregation. On the contrary, he is strengthened in his conviction that his provisional conclusion in chapter 1 is correct.

B. The Results Further Confirmed

In v. 12, The Teacher returns to his starting point (see 1:17,18). What is the relationship between wisdom and folly? Consider the situation of the times: Israel lives under the rule of a foreign despot. In time, this despot will be replaced by a successor. But will that

successor choose a different and a better course, or will he follow in the steps of his predecessor? For the church of that time, this was a most crucial question. For it is evident to those who believe (as a result of the gift of God's wisdom), that wisdom exceeds folly as light exceeds darkness. Yet The Teacher has come to the conclusion that not wisdom but folly always has the upper hand. People love the darkness more than the light.

This was the situation in the time of the kings of the house of David. Godless kings repeatedly destroyed the reforming work of their pious predecessors.

This situation is, however, universal. For also today, although the Davidic kingship has disappeared, godless kings still destroy the work of their pious predecessors. With one blow a fool torpedoes that which a wise (pious) ruler has built up over many years. Nothing of it remains. This is a harsh reality for The Teacher. Nothing has remained of what either David or the faithful kings in the messianic line built up. Only the stump of Jesse remains (Isaiah 11:11).

The wise and the foolish suffer the same fate: nothing remains of the work done throughout their lives. Fools die, and so do the wise. "What then do I gain by being wise?" if wisdom does not have any lasting effect anyway? "I must leave [all that I have toiled for] to the one who comes after me" who can do with it whatever he desires. This makes The Teacher desperate: something must change.

Questions similar to Malachi's (2:17, 3:13-15) arise with renewed intensity). In v. 20 ("So I began to despair...") the word, "I" denotes the complete Solomonic wisdom from beginning to end. Verse 21 (cf. 1:3) speaks about a "man" but this man used his strength for the church. He did it with so much sorrow that his mind did not rest even at night.

You must realize that the question with which The Teacher is concerned in this passage is not: "what happens to the pious and the ungodly after this life", but concerns the concrete and visible fruits of all the work of the believers here on earth. The path of the wise in this life is full of affliction: What must I do, and how must I do it, to God's honour and for the coming of the Messiah? With this in mind he begins his toil, but he feels that he will be forgotten, and his work will be forgotten also. It is folly that triumphs. God's work is vulnerable, and so is our work in God's church. Whoever lives out of experience sees death at the end of everything. Death has the final say. This concrete reality has gained such a hold on The Teacher that he almost stumbles under it; what a mess sin has caused! You can hear The Teacher sighing for the solution and for the triumph of life. In fact he is longing for the appearance of the Prince of Life!

C. The Results Made More Concrete

Some people read a kind of fatalism into vv. 24-26. But that is incorrect. For in these verses there is a note of great dependence on God's good pleasure. Verse 23 ends with: "This too is meaningless."

One question remains, however: What is one to do with those pleasures and riches of life which exist? Are they worth nothing? To this The Teacher replies: They do not at all change the image which I described. Use them, if God gives them. And since it is God who gives them, use them as a gift of God. But in all this, bow yourself before his good pleasure. The one toils, and may enjoy the fruits of his work. Another, who also toils, does not see any fruits (which does not mean that there is no fruit). Why this difference? That is a foolish question, because God does not disclose his secret will to us.

Although the Teacher does not criticize God's good pleasure, we may not conclude that he has reached a dead end in his searching. When The Teacher says (v. 26): "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" he does not refer to the good pleasure of God, but to the activity of man, who gathers industriously, but does not know whether he may enjoy the fruits of his labours or not.

Notice how often God and his good pleasure are mentioned in these verses. This is an important point in favour of The Teacher. God exists and he works in history. If his hand is seen in small things (a piece of bread, a glass of wine, etc.), will it then not be seen in everything - also in the crooked which cannot be made straight? Folly does not have the final word, but the good pleasure of God, the Creator and Preserver of all things, does. The Teacher falls silent and calls the covenant community to silence and hope. Though there is still no clear answer, there is a future in heaven above. For if God is there (a fact of which The Teacher is certain), then he also involves himself with the people and their history: God is active in history. In this manner, the church tries to understand the ways of God, the ways of the God of the promise of Genesis 3:15.

In fact, by confessing that the Lord is guiding her, the church has already answered the problem of vanity. The way to chapter 3 is open.

Questions

1. Tell something about the glory which Solomon had developed in his kingdom, which was a foreshadowing of and a pledge for the messianic kingdom described in Psalm 72. How was this glory lost again? Was this only because of the sin of his successor?
2. Is the loathing of life, of which 2:17 speaks, the same as the loathing which one finds in modern philosophers (and with many young people)? Hint: does the modern disgust for life come from the Spirit of Christ? Is it a sighing because of sin and the curse which has come over life? (cf. Psalm 90 and Romans 8:20-22)
3. Does this chapter voice a judgment about the optimistic "we are progressing" concept, so prevalent today?
4. Can a man himself determine whether he will have pleasure in life?
5. May man do whatever he pleases with God's creation? What does Article 12 of the Belgic Confession say about this?

6. May we say that Christ has broken the vain cycle of history when he did his work on Golgotha? Has there ever been such a cycle? (cf. the expression "the time had fully come" in Galatians 4:4.)

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