

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

History as a Miracle of God's Omnipotence

A. The Miracle Described

Every event has a firm place in God's counsel. That God's counsel is a plan of redemption is certain in the eyes of The Teacher, even though he does not say this in so many words. In any case fatalism does not determine The Teacher's thought in these verses. Rather, faith in God's providence determines his thought here. It is not difficult to connect this passage to Lord's Day 10.

The word "time" (in "a time to...") means: appointed time, proper time, also, opportunity. The images mentioned in verses 1-8 allude to the concrete church and world situation of that time: planting/plucking, building up/breaking down, speaking/keeping silent, war/peace, military service/embracing, loving/hating. Verse 9 states that it is senseless to labour this way, as if man will be able to change the existing situation. It is God Who determines this state of affairs. This, however, is not a reason for passivity (v. 10). There is a relationship between God's providence and man's toil for the coming of the day of the LORD. Verse 10 once again speaks about men¹, but this verse is spoken primarily in the assembled congregation, where each has his own specific task and consequently, each his own problems. (cf. 1:18, 2:20ff. As to the "times and seasons" cf. also Acts 1:7, where Jesus speaks about the Fatherhood of God.)

The task given to each man directs our attention back to Genesis 3:17ff. It is important to note that The Teacher points to God, the Creator, Who in the beginning gave to the people of the covenant a command to work (cultural mandate), a command which God maintains even after the fall on a cursed earth. The question of chapter 2:15 is condemned with this statement. In a crooked world, God's children are to work (properly). Thus, in verse 11 the Teacher confesses that God did make everything good (i.e. beautiful) in its time. There is a system in God's work, also in the ever-changing picture of war and peace, of liberty and oppression. The Teacher does not say this because he has experienced it, but because God has said so. Do not forget that The Teacher stands solidly on the terrain of God's revelation, and is a full member of God's covenant people. If this were not so, he could not speak as he does here.

B. The Miracle Investigated

The Teacher immediately adds to what he has just said, namely that men try to discover the system (thoughts) God has in his works. This is a permissible and necessary enterprise, because God put "eternity" into man's heart. "Eternity" in this context means: the passing of time. People (especially in the church) attempt to find an answer to the question how history works, what the main lines in history are, and what the relationships and associations between events are. In the beginning, God uttered messianic promises,

¹ *Ed. Note:* literally, "the sons of the man"

and the messianic age is depicted as something that is yet to come. How do the lines then run from alpha to omega?

Experience cannot give the final answer to this question, for the coming messianic age is announced by prophecy. This verse (11) has an obvious messianic slant. Whoever awaits that new age knows how he is to react to injustice and oppression. Nevertheless, one can grasp what God has done from the beginning to the end. God does not forget his promises, but fulfills them in a way that we can never discover. Whoever does his work in faith shall discover the boundaries which God has set, within which man may seek to uncover God's system in his works. Such a person will seek to honour those boundaries.

No wonder, then, that chapter 3:12,13 once again encourages man to enjoy life as a gift of God (cf. 2:24). This is possible if there is a time for everything. Meanwhile, let everyone leave the secret things to God (cf. Matthew 6:33,34).

C. The Miracle Adored

The Teacher has made an important discovery: what God does is for eternity, it is unalterably firm in his hand and is determined with a view to the Messiah. Man is to leave God's counsel in God's hand. Whoever reaches this conclusion, has risen above the "all is meaningless" (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 121). The motif "God is in heaven" (5:2) is already present here. God does what he does in such a way that man may worship in fear before him (cf. 5:7, 12:13). This fear of God does not include only recognition of his majesty (transcendence), but also an adoration of his abiding love for his people IN this time. Given the parallelism in verse 15b, this verse must mean that God permits that which has happened before to happen again. This, however, does not imply a simple repetition of chapter 1:9, for it is now obvious that God has the whole world in his hands. If, then, he causes that which has happened in the past to recur again in the present, he must have a specific redemptive purpose in mind. For, with every recurrence, God progresses. Having redeemed the good which was displaced by evil, God builds further on that good, so that there might remain a seed for David, for Jerusalem, and for Israel. This approach stands over against defeatism and negativism.

But the miracle remains a miracle.

Questions

1. Do you see any relationship between this portion of Scripture and Article 13 of the Belgic Confession? What did the Epicureans teach?
2. Verse 10 of this chapter speaks of a "burden" [or "business" in RSV]. Try to shed some light on this term by using Genesis 1-3. What difference is there between the work of man before and after the fall?
3. God has "set eternity in the hearts of men", we read in verse 11. This refers, in its primary meaning, to man as God created him. What do the Nihilists say? (cf. Dr. C. van der Waal in *Search the Scriptures.*)

4. Do you know of people who thought they could "fathom what God has done from beginning to end?" Think of the friends of Job. (cf. Luke 13:1-5, John 9:2ff.)
5. In the RSV chapter 3:14 reads: "that men should fear before him." What do you understand by the word "fear"? Does the phrase, "before him" have any specific meaning? (cf. Genesis 17:1.) Do you think that the covenant is relevant here?
6. Does chapter 3:14a not make us passive and lazy, since we cannot change what God does anyway? Consider again question 1, above, in this context.
7. Demonstrate how The Teacher rises here above the theme "all is meaningless". Show the relationship between this portion of Scripture and Christ's cross and open grave.

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