THE LIMITED HORIZON IN ECCLESIASTES

When Solomon had a dream in which God offered him a wide choice, the LORD was pleased when Solomon asked for a mind that listened and the ability to judge between good and evil. (1 Kng 2:9-10). The LORD also promised him riches and honour.

We see many examples of Solomon’s wisdom in the book of Proverbs. We regret that in Solomon’s later life his foreign, idol-worshipping wives led his heart astray. It is ironic, because Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have sections that warn about being led astray by women. The theme in Ecclesiastes is that everything is pointless. Do Christians take this as the final word on human existence?

How far does the wisdom in Ecclesiastes go? St Paul agreed about futility in this world. However, he traced it back to sin and the condemnation of God for it, and also presented God’s gracious answer to futility for believers (Rm 7:25; 8:20). The writers of the New Testament also looked back on Christ’s redemption, which has embraced the rest of the created order in its scope, and which includes the resurrection of the body. Eager Christian hope is the answer to the futility in this world (Rm 8:23-24).

Ecclesiastes says little about God’s Law and His commandments. However, it is a tremendous argument against free will, although it does not use that expression. Luther pointed this out in his preface to the book (Luther’s Works, AE 35:264). The counsels, plans, and undertakings of men are all pointless, and they always have a different outcome from what we want and purpose.

A search in Ecclesiastes for the principal words of the Gospel, like grace, mercy, trust, faith, believe, forgive, and righteousness (in the sense of the Gospel, as an unmerited gift of God) will not yield anything. That should immediately indicate its limited scope.

Certainly, God comes into Solomon’s perspective. He says that God has given human beings the burdensome task about which they are troubled (Ec 1:13), but he observes that everything is pointless and an attempt to catch the wind. He writes about care in worshipping God and fear of God’s anger (Ec 5:1-7). However, because he looks at human life from the viewpoint of human experience, his horizon is mostly limited to this present life. That seems to be why he says things about the death of human beings and of animals that surprise us. The wise man will die as the fool will die (Ec 2:16). “What happens to human beings and what happens to animals are the same. The one dies like the other. They all have the same spirit, and the human being has no advantage over the animal. For everything is pointless. All go to the same place. All have come from the dust, and all return to the dust” (Ec 3:19-20). Christians know that after death there are two places, heaven and hell, and not all will go to the same place. Solomon’s scope does not look beyond the grave at this point. That should be quite clear from the following verse alone: “Who knows whether the spirit of human beings goes upwards and the spirit of the animal goes downwards to the earth?” (Ec 3:21). He says more on this later: “… the dust returns to the ground from which it came, and the spirit returns to God, who gave it” (12:7). The cosmic redemption that Christ has won (Rm 8:21), and the great division beyond death and the judgment, in eternal life and eternal punishment (Mt 25:46) do not come into Solomon’s scope. For him, work, planning, knowledge, and wisdom end in the grave, to which we are going (Ec 9:10).

Even the positive statements about human life in Ecclesiastes are largely restricted to this present life. “Moreover, when God has given any person wealth and possessions, and has granted him the opportunity to enjoy them, to accept his lot, and to be happy in his toil, this is the gift of God. For he will not often think about the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the joy in his heart” (Ec 5:19-20). Surely we Christians want to add that Christ’s cross and resurrection have added the bright dimension of hope of the glory of God, the peace of reconciliation, the confidence that rests on God’s justifying verdict, and even the positive value in suffering (Rom 5:1-5).

Sometimes a facile reading might suggest that injustice in God had been the reason for the pointlessness of human existence (God forbid!). “There is a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he does not lack anything that he desires for himself. Nevertheless, God does not grant him the opportunity to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is pointless, and it is a painful calamity.” Solomon calls this a monstrous evil (Ec 6:1-2), but he does not mention sin and Satan as the reasons for this futility.

Like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes says a great deal about folly. Solomon assesses it from the point of view of this present world and the wisdom gained from experience. We recall that Jesus, however, mentioned folly as one of the sins that flow from the sinful heart (Mk 7:22).

What about God’s requirement of righteousness? Jesus set uncompromising standards for righteousness. It must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:20). People must be perfect like their heavenly Father (Mt 5:48). Consider, therefore, how should we understand the following: “I have seen everything in my pointless life. There is a righteous man who perishes in spite of his being righteous, and there is a wicked man who lives for a long time in spite of his being wicked. Do not be extremely righteous, and do not show yourself excessively wise! Why should you bring ruin on yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should hold on to the one, and not let your hand go from the other” (Ec 7:15-18). The idea that a person may
be a little wicked, as long as he is not very wicked, and that being very righteous and very wise are inadvisable, because they may bring ruin, are the kinds of things that many unregenerate people would agree with. Do not trouble yourself by being unrealistic! When Christians look beyond the horizons of birth and death, they assert that a comfortable average between extreme righteousness and extreme wickedness misses the point. God’s Law requires absolute perfection, and the only hope for God’s favour comes by way of repentance for every kind of wickedness and His forgiveness in Christ.

It is not that Ecclesiastes contradicts the Gospel of the New Testament. It is that God’s revelation of His grace in Christ has enabled us to see beyond the horizon of death and have hope of release from the present futility. Believers who know this can gain a great deal from Ecclesiastes. It asserts that life centred in God is not purposeless and meaningless. We believe that God has ordered everything according to His own purposes (Ec 3:1-15; 5:19; 6:1-2; 9:1). It reminds us to accept what God has appointed and our own limitations in this pointless world. Because we have hope beyond death, we can be far more patient and enjoy life as God gives it to us than Ecclesiastes, with its limited vision, suggests. The book has much to teach us about being prudent in everything, and living carefully before God and constituted authority. Jesus has also taught us our duty to fear God and keep His commandments. Compare: “Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments! For this is the whole duty of man” (Ec 12:13).

It is not quite true to say that in Ecclesiastes the scope is limited to this present life. After that remarkable passage that advises not to be too righteous and too wise, and not to be very wicked, there is an addition: “For the one who fears God will escape them all.” That makes room for the Gospel. God is the One who will finally rescue those who follow true wisdom through Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, from all their folly and wickedness. Luther commented on Ecclesiastes like this in his preface to the books of Solomon, “In this book he teaches that men are to be patient and steadfast in obedience, in the face of unpleasantness and temptation, and ever to wait out the brief hour in peace and joy. What they cannot keep or alter, they are to let go. It will all work out” (AE 35:260).