

THE MOST DANGEROUS BOOK IN THE BIBLE
APRIL 5, 1987

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What is the most dangerous book in the Bible? Any opinions? Last Sunday a couple from Michigan who had worshipped with us several Sundays, told me they were going back to Michigan, and because they would miss this sermon, would I mind telling them which book is the most dangerous. Even though I love mystery, I told them the topic of this sermon. Actually, I must admit that the title is not original. The title for this sermon and the main idea come from Rabbi Harold Kushner in his recent book, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough.

In my youth I was fascinated by the most dangerous book in the Bible. I read and studied it fervently. My interest in this book was rekindled recently when the 9:00 Bible class studied it. I was walking across the patio one Sunday morning when one of the class members, Mary Anderson, asked me to summarize the book. I spontaneously and flippantly answered, "Life makes no sense and isn't worth living. Blessed is the person who has never been born." Mary didn't like my answer! My interest, however, was renewed, and I was particularly excited to read Rabbi Kushner's interpretation of this fascinating book.

I'm talking this morning about Ecclesiastes, a short book which follows Proverbs in the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes is a Greek word. The Hebrew title is "Koheleth" which means "preacher." The "preacher" was a philosopher who was quite cynical and pessimistic about life. His conclusions may be dangerous if not properly understood.

Let me read excerpts from Ecclesiastes, using the Good News Version.

It is useless, useless. Life is useless, all useless. (Vanity of vanities, in the older translations.) You spend your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for it? I determined that I would examine and study all the things that are done in this world.

God has laid a miserable fate upon us. I have seen everything done in this world, and I tell you, it is all useless. It is like chasing the wind.

I decided to enjoy myself and find out what happiness is. But I found that this was useless, too. I discovered that laughter is foolish, that pleasure does you no good.

Then I thought about all that I had done and how hard I had worked doing it, and I realized that it didn't mean a thing. It was like chasing the wind. Nothing that I had worked for and earned meant a thing to me, because I knew that I would have to leave it to my successor, who might be wise, or who might be foolish--who knows? You work for something with all your wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then you have to leave it all to someone who hasn't had to work for it. It is useless, and it isn't right!

The same fate awaits humans and animals alike. One dies just like the other. They are the same kind of creature. A human being is no better off than an animal,

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because life has no meaning for either. They are both going to the same place--the dust.

Then I looked again at all the injustice that goes on in this world. The oppressed were crying, and no one would help them. No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side. I envy those who are dead and gone; they are better off than those who are still alive. But better off than either are those who have never been born, who have never seen the injustice that goes on in this world. Don't be surprised when you see that the government oppresses the poor and denies them justice and their rights. Every official is protected by the one over him, and both are protected by still higher officials. (And this was written 2,500 years ago! There is nothing new under the sun!)

If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want. It is useless. A rich man has so much that he stays awake worrying.

Here is a terrible thing that I have seen in this world: people save up their money for a time when they may need it, and then lose it all in some bad deal and end up with nothing left to pass on to their children. We leave this world just as we entered it--with nothing. In spite of all our work there is nothing we can take with us. It isn't right! We go just as we came. We labor, trying to catch the wind, and what do we get? We get to live our lives in darkness and grief, worried, angry, and sick.

I used my wisdom to test all of this. I was determined to be wise, but it was beyond me. How can anyone discover what life means? It is too deep for us, too hard to understand.

Why do people commit crimes so readily? Because crime is not punished quickly enough. Oh yes, I know what they say: "If you obey God, everything will be all right, but it will not go well for the wicked." But this is nonsense. Look at what happens in the world: sometimes the righteous get the punishment of the wicked, and the wicked get the reward of the righteous. I say it is useless.

Invest your money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit. (Remember, this was written 2,500 years ago!) Put your investments in several places because you never know what kind of bad luck you are going to have in this world.

I realized another thing, that in this world fast runners do not always win the races, and the brave do not always win the battles. The wise do not always earn a

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living, the intelligent do not always get rich, and the capable do not always rise to high position.

Useless, useless. It is all useless.

You have heard a few samples from this dangerous book---subversive thoughts which are quite different from the rest of the Bible! As you might suspect, Ecclesiastes had a difficult time getting into the Bible. In approximately 90 A.D., a Council of Jewish leaders met to select the inspired material to include in what is now our Old Testament. There was much discussion about Ecclesiastes. Many found it offensive and threatening to their faith. Some wanted to ban the book, in case an innocent young reader might be led into heresy. Rabbi Kushner wrote, "But somehow, even as they overcame their embarrassment at the eroticism of the Song of Songs,...they made room for the cynicism and skepticism of Ecclesiastes." (pg. 35)

I'm glad Ecclesiastes was included in the Bible. Through the years when I have felt discouraged and depressed, I have found Ecclesiastes to be cathartic. Here is someone, I have said to myself, who understands! Ecclesiastes is a refreshing antidote to the popular positive thinking and possibility thinking theology of our generation. According to some preachers today, if you think positively, and if you send in money, you will be successful. Ecclesiastes is a refreshing contrast to that nonsense. Probably the main reason for the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the canon was the assumption that it was written by King Solomon. Scholars today dispute Solomon's authorship. But, another reason for its inclusion in the Bible is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes' conclusion. In the face of paradox, cynicism, unanswered questions, and the injustice and uselessness of it all, Ecclesiastes concludes (and this might be dangerous, if not properly understood): enjoy and be grateful for God's gifts.

Ecclesiastes concluded in 2:24, "The best thing a man can do is eat and drink and enjoy what he has earned." And again in 3:12, "So I realized that all we can do is be happy and do the best we can while we are still alive. All of us should eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It is God's gift." The dangerous temptation is to interpret it pessimistically as "eat, drink and be merry." Ecclesiastes explored the route of pleasure and found it to be useless. Here he is talking about finding happiness and meaning in those simple things of life we often take for granted.

You do not need to search on the mountain top for meaning, or in wealth, wisdom, even piety. You can find meaning in God's gifts. The most complete expression of his conclusion is in 9:7-10. The Revised Standard Version is poetic, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love...Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

From time to time, for no apparent reason, I am overwhelmed with a sense of well-being, peace, contentment, and gratitude. I respond, "Thank you, Lord, thank you." When I reflect on such inspiring moments, I realize I am happy with my life. I give thanks for my family--my wife and children. I give thanks for my work. I enjoy my job, and I like it here! In the midst of confusion, problems, pessimistic world issues, seemingly lack of answers to critical questions, rejoice in what you have. Enjoy your meals, enjoy your

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spouse, enjoy your work, your friends, and a glass of wine. Ecclesiastes seems to be saying: Because nothing lasts, nothing endures, learn to find meaning and purpose in the now, in the present, in what you have and are. Kushner wrote,

Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever...Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting...When we stop searching for the Great Answer, the Immortal Deed which will give our lives ongoing meaning, and instead concentrate on filling our individual days with moments that gratify us, then we will find the only possible answer to the question, What is life about? It is not about writing great books, amassing great wealth, achieving great power. It is about loving and being loved. It is about enjoying your food...It is about savoring the beauty of...the sunsets, the leaves turning color, the rare moments of true human communication.

An 85-year old woman from the hill country of Kentucky reflected,

If I had it to do over, if I had my life over, I would dare to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would be sillier, I would take fewer things seriously...I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see, I'm one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day...I've been one of those persons who never went anyplace without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I'd travel lighter.

Ecclesiastes concluded, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment." Enjoy what you have, the ordinary, daily joys of life, and be grateful. (11:8) "Be grateful for every year you live. No matter how long you live, remember that you will be dead much longer." Be grateful and get things in perspective. (7:14) "When things are going well for you, be glad, and when trouble comes, just remember: God sends both happiness and trouble; you never know what is going to happen next." Accept your life. Be grateful, and have reverence for God. Ecclesiastes ends his book, (12:13) "Have reverence for God, and obey his commands." In the face of the mysteries of life, have reverence for God, fear God, be humble, grateful and enjoy what you have.

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