

Tired of Life, With Everything to Live For

By John Halford

As a member of our local Ministerial Association, I take my turn with a Bible Study at one of the local retirement homes. Folks in these parts tend to live a very long time, and some of the residents are well into their eighties and nineties. And their minds are still sharp.

On one evening last February, a lady who will be 100 next year asked me, "Why has God let me live this long? What's the point?"

How do you answer that?

I told her I would need to think about it. A week later I was still thinking.

When we met together again I said, "I don't have an answer to your question. But let me show you some things in the Bible that I bet you didn't know were there."

I asked the group to turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It took a few moments to find it. Many of us, even if we have been Christians all our lives, don't really know our way around the Old Testament.

Unlike the Proverbs, which are aimed at young people, Ecclesiastes seems to be directed at old folks. The author—it was probably King Solomon—looks back on a long and eventful life. He had "been there, done that" and got just about every T-shirt. He contemplates not only his considerable achievements, but also the futility of it all. It makes for a surprising book. I like it in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* version, which makes the frank, almost cynical observations even more down to earth.

It begins, "Smoke, nothing but smoke... There's nothing to anything — it's all smoke" (1:1-2), and continues

"What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth" (verses 3-4).

It continues in this vein through 12 chapters of what seems like glum world-weariness.

"Everything's boring, utterly boring — no one can find any meaning in it... Boring to the eye, boring to the ear. What was will be again, what happened will happen again" (1:8-9).

"I tried my level best to penetrate the absurdity of life. I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do during the years we spend on this earth" (2:3).

"But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing" (2:11).

"Search as hard as you like, you're not going to make sense of it. No matter how smart you are, you won't get to the bottom of it" (8:17).

As we read these words, everyone murmured in agreement. "Yep—that is how it is." "He got that right." "Yes sir. I feel like that too sometimes."

"But, what are things like that doing in the Bible?" someone asked. "I always read the Bible for encouragement. This seems so pessimistic."

"But it is how you feel sometimes, isn't it?" I asked. They agreed. Whoever wrote this book certainly understood what it was like to get old. These physical frames, in which we spend the first few decades of life, are not meant to last forever:

"In old age, your body no longer serves you so well, Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen... The shades are pulled down on the world. You can't come and go at will. Things grind to a halt... you're well on your way to eternal rest, while your friends make plans for your funeral" (12:3-5).

They laughed at that. It was so true.

"Well," I said. "That's the best I can do. I haven't answered the question, but this book shows that it is not wrong for you to ask it. Although the Ancient of Days never experiences senility or the other effects of old age, he has anticipated the kind of things we worry about in the later years.

Ecclesiastes is a reminder that you are 100 percent alive until you are 100 percent dead. So, "Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted. Take delight in each light-filled hour, remembering that there will also be many dark days and that most of what comes your way is smoke" (11:8).

Eventually it will all become clear. This life, even if it seems to drag on and on, is only the opening notes of a symphony God intends to share with us for eternity. "The last and final word is this: Fear God. Do what he tells you. And that's it. Eventually God will bring everything that we do out into the open and judge it according to its hidden intent, whether it's good or evil" (12:13).

It seems that the weary old cynic who wrote Ecclesiastes ended up trusting in God's grace.



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