

WHERE DO WE BEGIN? Reflections on Ecclesiastes 12

Each academic year Dr. Martin has traditionally begun each course by reading the concluding chapter of Ecclesiastes—with commentary. A transcript of his remarks, edited only slightly, appears below. By God's grace, we can begin and end with God in all of life and every professional endeavor.

Many of us have had the privilege of being in the presence of a loved one who knows he or she is dying. Insofar as the individual has energy to speak, their final words are of primary significance as far as they are concerned. Most of what we share with one another, and I speak for myself, is at best of secondary significance, usually lesser, but a person who is dying will seek to share what is of primary significance. I would like to share some final words which are significant for all of us. Some of us could quote them from memory as they are among the most beautiful literature ever penned.

Solomon, as recorded in the last division of Ecclesiastes, was not facing death, but he was sharing—and God through him—the final words relative to his profound critique of this age. Indeed, there is no greater critique of this age than Solomon's. Why so? Well, we know that Solomon was the wisest man to have lived—apart from, of course, the God-Man Christ who, as 100% God and 100% man, alone had perfect knowledge. When God offered to grant the young king Solomon a request, Solomon requested wisdom, and God granted him, not only wisdom, but everything else as well.

Therefore, Solomon enjoyed everything this age has to offer to the maximum. He enjoyed matters intellectual, being more knowledgeable and discerning than anyone who has lived. (By the way, please note that he was not better educated, but more knowledgeable; sadly, as we know, some of the most educated people are the least knowledgeable.) He enjoyed the financial to the maximum; no one was more wealthy than Solomon. He enjoyed the political, being a highly regarded and highly respected king. He enjoyed the social; no one had greater status than Solomon. He enjoyed the sensual; nothing was withheld from Solomon with respect to pleasures of this age. In short, there is nothing which this age has to offer which Solomon did not experience to the fullest extent.

What, then, we would ask, was Solomon's conclusion relative to this age enjoyed to the maximum? And what are we told, through Solomon, is God's conclusion of the whole matter?

We could, of course, write volumes plumbing the depths of this final chapter of Ecclesiastes. We will highlight only a few of its salient points.

The first few words of God through Solomon are critical:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth. . .

Remember now thy Creator... Having never studied Hebrew, I can tell you all about it! However, I am certain an accurate translation would be, 'remember always' or 'remember never to forget' thy Creator. In other words, the starting point for all of us in our thinking, our speaking, our living, must be th Creator or we have missed the mark. There are many gods, and we worship many gods today. Indeed, sadly, there is more idolatry today than there has ever been in the history of the human race, excepting, perhaps, in the days of Noah. However, there is only One Creator God. The only God that you and I should worship is the Creator God. He is the only worthy starting point. When you stop to think about it, it is pathetic for man to worship anyone or anything

other than the Creator of what is! Have we ever stopped to think about that? We are told: Remember always, remember to begin with, remember never to forget, thy Creator God.

Solomon continues: *...in the days of thy youth.* This phrase has reference, not merely to literal youth but, more profoundly, to the reality that, at the earliest point of our accountability, we need to begin and end with God in our thinking and our living.

Secondly, then, Solomon brings us face to face with the ultimate reality of this age: death. Our days are numbered. Every one of us is going to die. The “evil days” will overtake every one of us. From Satan comes sin and from sin comes death. This is true, not only of individuals, but of nations and civilizations. Every nation and civilization is going to die. Solomon paints the picture of death—brilliantly:

... while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way...

They shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way... Fear, indeed, characterizes the modern West and world. Men’s hearts are failing for fear. The hallmark today, including among professing Christians, is fear. People fear loss of health; they fear death; they fear loss of wealth, loss of position, loss of profession. Politicians trade on fear.

The Biblical Christian, however, does not fear. Perfect love casteth out all fear, and God is love, even perfect love. The Biblical Christian does not fear, my friends, for the Biblical Christian enjoys the power of the resurrection of the dead! How can you fear when you enjoy the power of the resurrection of the dead? Ah, but beginning and ending with this age, the ultimate reality will be fear.

...and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

This is true, once again, not only of individuals; it is true of nations and of civilizations.

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

What is the operative word? Broken—broken, broken, broken. If that is not our nation and civilization. It is fragmented, my friends. It is broken. It is in the throes of death. Most people do not realize it but, without the healing of God, Western/American civilization is finished, and very quickly. The tissue of a civilization is extremely thin and our civilization is only a fraction away

from utter fragmentation. Most people, however, are oblivious to these realities. We live in a time of great deception.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Having painted the picture of death as the ultimate reality of this age, Solomon now sets forth his considered conclusion relative to this age (absolutized):

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

What does Solomon mean by vanity? This is seldom understood today. The word *vanity* is best translated as a “bubble.” You reach out to grasp it and when you think you have it, it’s gone. This age absolutized ends in vanity. You think you have wealth, and it’s gone. You think you have health, and it’s gone. You think you have status, and it’s gone. No one was better qualified to comment on this age absolutized than the great preacher, for he enjoyed it to the maximum, and what was his conclusion? ***Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.*** Today, of course, we would not use the word *vanity*, we would use the word *absurdity*. Everything is finally absurd.

My friends, this is written in the eyes of young people today. This is the modern West. Everything is finally absurd. There is nothing for which to live and to die—for there is no truth, there is no absolute, there is no certainty, there is no justice, there is no ultimate reference point. This is modern man. ***Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher.*** Turn on a television program, view a newscast, read a novel, watch a movie, listen to a political address, listen to a lecture, and what screams out at you is the message, “Vanity of vanities, everything is absurd!”

Ah, but wait a moment. The preacher was not a modern man. He does not stop at this point. Why has modern man gotten into this dilemma? Because modern man has begun with the presupposition of the non-existence of God. The prevailing mind for the last several centuries has been the naturalist mind, and the naturalist mind presupposes as its starting point that God does not exist. We have tried to build out from that presupposition, searching diligently for answers to the basic questions. Sadly, however, we are being forced to conclude that there are no answers, that our search has been in vain. *Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.*

Sadly, what we end up with, if we presuppose the non-existence of God, is an absolutized relativity, and that is all. In other words, once again, absurdity. For there is nothing to know for certain; there is no truth; there is no justice; there is nothing for which, ultimately, to live or to die. Nothing. Zero. Everything is vanity. That is the truth relative to this age absolutized, without question. Most people today, even those who are professing Christians, stop here, unable to escape the pervasiveness of the naturalist mind. Everything to which we have been exposed proclaims an absolutized relativity. That is what we believe, and our lives reflect this.

Ah, but God does not stop here. The preacher does not stop here, because the preacher does not absolutize this age. The preacher was not a modern man. If he stopped here, we would all end up, finally, in absurdity and despair. The preacher, however, brings us back to the opening admonition: ***Remember now thy Creator.*** He brings us back to God who is, not only Creator but, in the midst of vanity, Communicator of Truth.

The word, *moreover*, is the one that first captures our attention. *Moreover* is a very basic word. “More,” that is, more important than anything that has been said heretofore, and “over,” that is, “greater than or above all that has been said up to this point, hear the following.”

And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.

The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.

Moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. Ah, there is knowledge! There is something to know! This is tremendous! Even in our finite and fallen condition, God has not left us groping in the dark.

Yea—and we would have to shout that, “Yea!!!” to give the proper translation, ***he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.*** Now, if you were to ask most people today what a proverb is, they would answer “a wise saying.” That is not true. Oh, it is true, but it is not the final definition of the word *proverb*. What is a proverb? A proverb is a true saying. This is very critical. It is a true saying. What do we mean by a true saying? A saying that was true yesterday, is true today, and will be true tomorrow.

The preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. Here, God repeats Himself. We have words of truth. Is repetition necessary? Yes, because we are very slow learners, and I begin and end with myself in that regard. Indeed, I have discovered in my teaching that students must be exposed at least three times to that which is being taught before it can be known and, by the grace of God, understood.

We have here, then, two characteristics of good teaching. A good teacher is a teacher who, first of all, believes in truth. A teacher who does not believe in truth cannot teach anything. Have we ever stopped to think about that? Secondly, then, if a person believes in truth, that person will repeat that truth until it is known. Therefore, a good teacher always repeats.

Having come to understand this, my teaching, by design, employs a “rotary method” of repetition—for which I do not apologize, though it is sometimes criticized by students. It has been my privilege to lecture internationally for over twenty-five years and once, while lecturing in Hurlach, Germany, I received one of the greatest compliments I have been paid. Present was a retired colonel from the American military. At the end of the series of lectures, he came to me and said, “You are the most effective teacher I have ever had.” That was quite a compliment, for this man, as a retired colonel, had certainly had many outstanding teachers. He said, “You use the military method. You say what you are going to say, you say it, and then you say what you have said.” I had not known anything about the military method, but I recognized that any method employed by the military must be effective, for men’s lives often depend upon their having learned what has been taught.

God, who is the best teacher in existence, repeats Himself. In fact, those who read the Bible regularly will discover that God regularly repeats Himself. This is tremendous, my friends! You cannot escape the truth when you read the Bible because it is repeated over and over again. Therefore, by the way, there is no excuse for ignorance. Any person can read the Bible and can know the truth of God and of what is. God repeats Himself. ... ***that which was written was upright, even words of truth.***

The words of the wise are as goads... I like this. They are keeping us on the path we should be going for our own benefit. ...***and as nails, fastened by the masters of assemblies.*** I like that, as

well. When a master of an assembly fastens a nail, it is fastened! ...*which are given from one shepherd*. Ah, this is tremendous! There is one source of truth.

Then we come to a parenthesis, a very important parenthesis which, however, is often misunderstood. Once again we find ourselves contemplating this age absolutized:

And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Is God here speaking disparagingly of writing or studying? Not at all. What He is doing is critiquing the reality when this age is absolutized. When we forget God and slip into an absolutized relativity, there will be the making of many books without end because we will be ever learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth. Our much study will become a weariness to the flesh.

How many people today really enjoy studying? Not many people that I have met. Every Biblical Christian should love to study, recognizing that it is a tremendous privilege, a wonderful gift of God, to be able to learn about Him and His creation. Most people today, however, including most professing Christians, do not enjoy studying. Why is this? Hear me! The reason people do not enjoy studying today is that they have been exposed to the naturalist mind from day one, to an absolutized relativity—and it is no fun to study an absolutized relativity!

We have been taught, by implication and by explication, that there is no truth, that there is nothing to know for certain, that everything is absurd. Virtually everything that we have seen on television, virtually every newspaper we have read, virtually every political speech we have heard (with exceptions, but they are exactly that: exceptions) have been predicated on an absolutized relativity flowing from the naturalist mind. Children's stories to college textbooks reek with this mentality. We have been immersed in an endless spinning of the wheels. Nothing can be more boring than that! More debilitating! More destructive. It is a weariness to the flesh. After a while, having become utterly exhausted, a person dies from the neck up simply in order to survive! It is not possible, ultimately, to live on the basis of an absolutized relativity; therefore, we cease studying.

Ah, but we do not stop with an absolutized relativity:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. This is tremendous! There is a conclusion! Watch a television program today; there is no conclusion; it goes on and on. Read a modern novel, there is no conclusion to it, no large purpose, no significance. The same is true of most modern novels, most modern music, or whatever else you wish to address. If there is no truth, there can never be any conclusion. Without truth in an absolute sense, it is impossible to arrive at a conclusion. Relativity is inescapable. Biblically, however, there is a conclusion.

God, speaking through the great preacher, says, ***Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.*** The whole matter refers to everything—nothing excepted, nothing excluded.

Fear God, and keep his commandments:

for this is the whole duty of man.

Fear God. . . . Today, we no longer understand this phrase Biblically. We believe it refers to God as a taskmaster or a slave driver. Why? Because we live in a naturalist age from which the supernatural has been cut away and, therefore, we have no way of knowing God. How, then, do we

think of Him? We think of him, perhaps, as we think of our father. Maybe, however, our father abused us, maybe he was a person for whom we could have no respect and so we see God on the basis thereof. No! Throw out the anthropological, my friends. Do not try to understand God beginning and ending with a mere mortal, whoever that mortal may be. Understand God beginning and ending with God!

What is meant by “Fear God?” Augustine translated it this way, “Enjoy God.” This is tremendous. Have you ever thought of that? Enjoy God, reverence Him, hold Him in awe. Yes, God is Holy, and we tremble before Him in our finiteness and fallenness, but God is also the Redeemer who came to restore us to right relationship with Him. Therefore, our Creator God enjoins us to “fear” Him, not as a taskmaster intending to enslave us, which is an anthropological construct, but as a loving Creator who would set us free and bless us, both in this age and the age to come.

We are, then, to fear God . . . *and keep his commandments*, his laws, which are for our benefit. . . . *for this is the whole duty of man*. This is the reason we were created. There is no other reason for our creation. This is the **whole** duty of man—not the partial, not the primary, but the whole duty of man. Reverencing God, enjoying Him, keeping Him in awe, and obeying His laws are the very reason for which we were created! (By the way, one of the most abused words of the young generation today is “awesome.” As Biblical Christians we ought to refuse to use the common coin, particularly when words with significant Biblical content are being abused. Only God is awesome.)

Finally, we come to the last verse, the very final words of God through Solomon. No more important words exist anywhere.

Albert Camus, one of the most brilliant writers of the twentieth century, a very gifted novelist who died in an automobile crash in 1960, made the following observation on the basis of this age absolutized. He said, “If there is a god, he must be the devil.”

Given the naturalist mind which prevails, Camus was right! When we look around, what do we see? We see poverty, disease, ignorance, war, injustice, destruction, death. During the twentieth century, my friends, we have seen these ills on a magnitude unprecedented. Are you aware of the fact that more people have been put to death in the twentieth century in the name of applied social science than in all previous centuries combined? It would appear that Camus is right, that if there is a god, he must be the devil. Have you ever confronted the awful realities of our time and asked why they are taking place and what, if anything, can be done? If not, you have not lived! What is to be done in the face of these realities? Camus was grappling with these questions, trying to answer them, and he concluded that if there is a god, he must be the devil.

However, Camus was cheating, my friends. Why? Because he began with the presupposition of the non-existence of God. He imbibed the naturalist mind. He said, while presupposing that there is no god, that if there is a god, he must be the devil. But wait a moment. If I presuppose that something doesn't exist, how can I turn around and comment on it? That is a tautology. It is the epitome of absurdity!

By the way, are you aware that there is no such thing as an atheist? I have never met an atheist! Never! I will never meet an atheist. It is not possible to meet an atheist. Why? Because, if a person truly presupposed the non-existence of God, that person would not be arguing that God does not exist. It would be a given. Why would one argue about something which one assumes has never existed? On the contrary, the reality is that those people who purport to be atheists

thereby prove the existence of God! We ought to stop and think about that; it is the truth, my friends.

As we have said, given his presupposition, though we recognize that he was cheating, Camus was correct. His starting point was the naturalist mind. By the way, we cannot single out Camus for criticism, as all *people today are* afflicted by the naturalist mind. As we have said, that is what we have all imbibed from the time we were born. We were born into an age when the naturalist mind is so monolithic that even that which remains of the idea of the supernatural has been extruded through that mind. It is almost impossible to escape it. Indeed, there is only one way a person can escape the naturalist mind: on the basis of the power of the resurrection of the dead! Only by the grace of God, as God enables us to begin and end with God in our hearts, our thinking, can we have a renewed mind. Otherwise, we are trapped in the naturalist mind and, therefore, we will logically conclude with Camus that, if there is a god, he must be the devil.

Why, given Camus' presupposition, must god be the devil? Because, in an absolutized relativity, there can be no justice. If there is no God, there can be no truth, no absolute and, accordingly, there cannot be justice. It is impossible. Why? Because, you see, in an absolutized relativity, it is not possible to find a judge possessed of truth who would be, therefore, capable of rendering justice! Have we ever stopped to think about that one? It is not possible! Thus, Camus's conclusion was right.

How often do we hear about justice today? How many politicians have you heard talk about justice? We almost never hear about justice because the naturalist mind cannot arrive at justice. It stands to reason that it is not possible to have justice unless we can have a judge whose knowledge is perfect and, given the naturalist mind, there can be no such judge. Is your knowledge perfect? Is my knowledge perfect? Is our knowledge perfect? Oh, no! Therefore, in an absolutized relativity there cannot be any justice; there is no possibility of justice.

We have seen this rendered in the United States. We no longer have the rule of law in this country. The highest officer of the land committed perjury, obstructed justice, abused power, and was allowed to continue to serve. Had the Biblical mind obtained, he would have been cashiered, but the naturalist mind obtained, and he continued to serve. What he had done made no difference. We see, then, that there is no rule of law left in this country. Unhappily, however, when the rule of law is gone, civilization will not endure. Why? Each person will say, "The president can get away with it, and so can I," this is multiplied across the land, and there is disintegration, fragmentation, and the termination of the civilization. Indeed, most civilizations are now dead, and this one is rapidly dying. The rule of law is history in this country; it no longer exists.

The problem with Camus was, not his conclusion, but his presupposition. His presupposition was wrong. His presupposition does not and cannot explain the what-is-ness of what-is. He presupposed the non-existence of God. But that is false. There is a God who is there. Moreover, God has not been silent. He has made known the truth of Himself and what is to man—truly, though not exhaustively—in verbal, propositional form in the Bible, a form that can be understood, communicated, and lived.

Beginning and ending with God, we can know the truth of God and of what is. Moreover, there is justice. Why? Ah, here we go, the fourteenth and final verse. This fourteenth verse, my friends, is one of the most critical verses of God to each of us:

***For God shall bring every work into judgment,
with every secret thing,***

whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

You see, there is a Judge whose knowledge is perfect! There is a Judge who knows everything that has occurred, everything that is occurring, and everything that will occur. However, He knows even more than that! He knows everything that might have occurred and never does! That Judge, with His perfect knowledge, can, does, and will render justice. Therefore, because there is a Judge whose knowledge is perfect, there is justice!

Given this reality, we cannot agree with Camus. We have a different starting point: the existence of the Biblical Creator God. Therefore, we know that ***God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.*** Is this clearly understood? You and I do not have to be modern people! Moreover, you and I can live on the basis of this knowledge, whereas we cannot live on the basis of Camus's presupposition and conclusion. It is not possible. It will be the death of any nation or civilization. Nothing is more important than this final verse; nothing, zero.

In conclusion, how would we summarize this final chapter? The significance of this twelfth and final division of the words of God through the great preacher is, very simply, this: We are to begin and we are to end with God in all of our thinking, speaking, and living. **Remember now thy Creator... for God shall bring every work into judgement.** This is tremendous, my friends; this is liberating. Without this we wallow in the world of relativity and we end up agreeing with Camus, but armed with the recognition that there is a Creator who has perfect knowledge and is a just Judge, we can pray:

*Our Father, we thank you that you have delivered us from evil,
for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.*