

An uncompromising look at humanity

Ecclesiastes 7, 15-18



¹⁵In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness,
and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

¹⁶Do not be overrighteous,
neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?

¹⁷Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?

¹⁸It is good to grasp the one
and not let go of the other.

Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.^[a]

"Can you tell me how to become a Christian?" a man asked me recently. And before I could even answer, he asked, "And how long does it take?" Behind this question lies a desire for a simple guideline. People want to be able to figure out the matter of God in a few simple steps. Because everything else in our world seems to have a little instruction book, people expect that it will work the same way with God. People expect that the question of God should be similar to a good diet, feeding a canary or the three steps to a happy holiday in Spain. And that is why people also want very simple explanations of being a Christian, something like: "What do I have to do as a Christian during Lent?" Or "Can I drink alcohol as a Christian?" In all of these questions lies a desire to do things the right way and not the wrong way. And because the Internet usually has very specific answers to such specific problems, people expect such specific instructions from Christianity and from faith in God. But life is more complicated than that. You cannot solve all problems with one set of instructions. And there isn't a three-step program for everything. Ecclesiastes is a book in the Bible that addresses this broken and incurable human situation and takes it seriously. And comes to an astonishingly sobering conclusion, which is: don't try too hard, because you might be like the person who does sports every day and has a stroke at 45, while someone else lives an unhealthy life and lives healthily until they're 90. Solomon makes the sobering statement that life does not always run like an automaton. Life is not a "wishing well of good fortune" but a matter of fact: "that's how it is." And if Ecclesiastes gives us any advice at all, it is that we should adapt to this situation. In other words, a life where we keep our minds open to pretty much all sides: not too fair and not too wise, not too rich and not too poor. At first glance, this seems like strange advice. We long for clearer advice. A hint where we see things in black and white; some instruction by which we can distinguish more clearly between Light and darkness. Where we can know what we should or should not do. But in Ecclesiastes we do not find such clear distinctions. Instead we should stay in the middle and cover our bases. Neither lean too far in one direction nor the other. Even if this advice from Solomon seems strange to us, I think that the advice can be of great importance, especially in our information age. Because with the abundance of guides and goals that we can pursue, there is ever greater confusion. This is because people have lost the sense of why we are actually doing this.. The guides explain to us, for example, how we can get rich quickly or make a lot of money on the stock market, but they cannot explain to us why we want to get rich in the first place. The Preacher Solomon shies away from concrete advice and goes much more in depth and asks himself why we do things. He asks the question of motivation. Life is contradictory

and the simplest advice can lead us astray. Even the well-intentioned pursuit of justice can be a godless confusion. People may strive to live a just life and do everything they can to avoid breaking God's commandments, but lose sight of God himself. The result can often be the opposite of justice. We humans think so much of doing the right thing. But is that which we render to be right always beneficial? There are enough examples of people doing evil on the basis of a right decision. Some are on their way on a just fight against the evil of globalization and burn cars and attack the police. There are even occasional deaths. The will and the pursuit is for justice. But the result is not good.

People have been establishing hell on earth in their quest for justice. We can find examples in all spheres of society. When Ayatollah Khomeini landed in Tehran, many around the world believed that this man would finally bring justice to the people of Iran. What followed was a theocracy that became hell for the people. This terror of justice is not only found in political life. How often do we think we are doing the right thing, even in our close family circles. And how quickly it is, even in our close family circles, to justify our unjust actions by saying that we were right. In our close family circles, you can also create hell for others by doing what you think is right. Perhaps the Pharisees of Jesus' time are a good example of this. They were zealous about the law and made life difficult for their fellow human beings by the same law. They didn't really become happy as a result. Basically, we humans have fallen into a simple mistake. We think that life is an ever increasing pursuit of something better or higher. In a completely irrational way, we therefore strive to become richer, smarter, more successful and, following the example of the pious, more righteous. And when we achieve this goal, we become like the rich farmer in Jesus parable. We pat ourselves on the back and encourage ourselves to finally be happy... and yet we are not! "You fool!" says God to the rich farmer. "You missed the most important thing!" The rich farmer is in all of us. How many people are there who strive for a certain goals in their whole life and when they finally achieve it, they become deeply unhappy. Ecclesiastes has a completely different view of the world. Instead of encouraging people to become higher and better, he describes life as the swing of a clock. Tick--tock - up and down... a time for everything: living, dying, growing up, becoming old, being successful, becoming poor. Everything has its time and people have no choice but to adapt to it. We all know this pendulum swing. Starting a new life and resigning yourself to old age, being arrogant and hiding like a beaten dog. Solomon himself knows this swing of the pendulum. He too tried to lead a pious life and was repeatedly led into the depths by terrible temptations and wrong paths. But Solomon doesn't just talk about people. Ultimately, he is concerned with finding the meaning of life. He asks us "why". And in asking this question "why" he comes to God. The real meaning and reason of everything. The incomprehensible God who is far above all our efforts. The God we cannot find. Who we will never find explained on a YouTube channel. Solomon doesn't try to explain this God either. He can only be amazed. God is not, like us, caught in the eternal cycle of being born and dying, growing and withering, hope and despair. And it is precisely the view of this God that does not leave Solomon alone. He faces human failure and knows that there is more. There must be more. There must be more because God exists. What he lacks is to break out of this human cycle and have a future. The whole axis of this life must become changed. It is like Jesus says to Nicodemus: We must be born again.

Or as the Preacher Solomon says: "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." Both the Preacher Solomon and Jesus break through the endless cycle of human fate - the constant ups and downs of success and failure, joy and suffering. They open up a completely new perspective. This newness begins in God.

Jesus is this God among us. He takes our effort and burden away from us. Jesus not only wants to encourage us to keep getting better, but mainly also bears our failures and gives failure a new

meaning. With him, not only our success, but also our failures have meaning - and above all a future. Jesus stands above the ups and downs of life, above birth and death, above happiness and sorrow. And comes to us, in the midst of our fragility. He becomes one of us in weakness. An example of this is the following: A man tries to get his life under control. He builds up a company, and then loses it. He starts a family, experiences disappointments. Every time he thinks he has finally made it, another setback follows. At some point he loses the courage to hope at all and asks himself: "Why keep fighting if in the end everything will fall apart again?" Jesus finally gives this man a new perspective. He also teaches him to accept his failure. Through Jesus he learns that he no longer has to live in fear. He learns to be grateful for success without fearing the next failure. He now lives on a completely different basis: not the level of constant failure, but a life in Christ - and thus a life in God. That is a real new beginning.

And like this man, people all over the world who are marked by hatred, addiction or repeated failure can find refuge in Christ. They can start anew - not by their own strength, but in him. To be born in Christ means to have a new future, a future that is no longer determined by the swing of life, but by the constancy of his love. Amen