

Thankfulness in Chaotic Times

I love Thanksgiving and not just because of the food, family and football. There is something about being reminded to be thankful and then being thankful that is good for the soul. We know that *“A joyful heart is good medicine but a broken spirit dries up the bones”* (Proverbs 17:22). Yet I must admit that I’m finding it more difficult this year to be grateful. Between the pandemic and its consequences, inability to be with my grandkids, the racial divide in our country, the contentious election of our leaders and the lack of life being “normal” I find it easier to grumble, complain, gripe and mutter than I do to rejoice, give thanks, express gratitude and live joyfully.

Trying to find solutions and live with joy often feels as Solomon says, like “chasing after wind”. As Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 1:2 **Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.** This is how the book begins and a quick and superficial reading gives the impression that the author, the wisest of men, presents a very negative and pessimistic picture of life. The repeated use of words like “vanity” or “meaninglessness,” and phrases like “striving after wind,” create the impression of hopeless despair, depicting the emptiness and disappointments of life.

The Hebrew term “vanity” meaning breath, wind, or vapor and connoting emptiness and futility is used 38 times in these 12 chapters. The book begins 1:1 and practically ends with the phrase – 12:8. It is used often enough and in reference to enough things that one could say that the total value of man’s endeavors is no more than chasing after wind. And this year more so than others I get it. Much of what we see is man’s chasing after wind.

Yet tucked away in the middle of this fascinating book are some words of encouragement that will lift us into Thanksgiving. After examining so much of the vanity of life Solomon makes an assessment of what he sees as good.

Ecc.5:18 **Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting...** Here is some “good news” if you will. Here is a perspective that results in joy and thanksgiving. Here is what life looks like when God is the focus and we see life from his perspective.

The word “fitting” can be translated “beautiful” so what is it that Solomon sees as good and beautiful in the midst of the vanity of life?

It is the ability to live your life with joy, even as you toil regardless of the number of years you may have because a joyful life is God’s gift to you. It’s a beautiful thing!

Here is what I have seen to be good and beautiful: to eat, to drink and to enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.

Read that again. What is good and beautiful? Eating, drinking and most of all enjoying life, even in the midst of toil and hardship. Why? Because life is a gift from God and the ability to enjoy it is a reward.

The word “reward” at the end of vs.18 is an interesting one and Bibles have different translations:

NAS – reward; NIV – lot; NKJ – heritage; KJ – portion

It is used in other texts to refer to the portion of the sacrifice, the portion of the inheritance, the portion of the priests. It has the idea of that which is rightfully yours, that which has been given to you as an inheritance or reward.

What is it that has been given as an inheritance? The ability to live life with joy. Solomon reiterates this idea in vs. 19 – the ability to enjoy life’s blessings is a gift. **Furthermore as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.** Joy is a gift from God and so is the ability to have joy. Note the use of the word “reward” here in vs.19. It’s the same word used in vs.18. Our inheritance or portion contains both the gift of life and the ability to enjoy it. Both come from God.

When we truly grasp the joy of living as a gift from God what happens?

Ecc.5:20 For he will not often consider the years of his life (the toil and hardship) because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Gladness of heart is the benefit. Instead of worry, there is great contentment. Instead of fear there is peace. Instead of grumbling there is rejoicing. The one who taps into the power to enjoy God’s gifts means that life in the present will be so full of joy and enjoyable that we won’t get bogged down in the past – sentimental or tragic, nor will you worry about the future days yet to come. But rather as you thank God for what he sends you day by day, you’ll be occupied by the present joys of your life. How? God keeps you occupied with gladness of heart.

God keeps us “occupied”, the root means to pay attention, to heed, to shout, to testify, so that God enables us to pay attention to, to heed the gladness of our hearts.

Literally: *For not much he shall remember the days of his life, because God answers in the joy of his heart.*

When we receive life as a gift from God and enjoy it then we will not get bogged down in the details, the problems, the struggles, the pitfalls of life because God speaks to us about joy, he focuses us on joy, he keeps us occupied with the gladness of our heart. Life with God is enough. And it is joyful. In the midst of the vanity of life, know this with certainty - life and joy are gifts from the hand of God.

As David concludes the 16th Psalm “...in Your presence is fullness of joy, in Your right hand are pleasures forever”.

It is no wonder than that the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us in 13:15 **Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to his name.**

Praise to God should be the whole tenor of our lives. We are to be so captivated and filled with the greatness and goodness and grace and majesty of God, that like a cup full to the brim, we are always spilling over in praises to Him.

So this Thanksgiving let us be Thanks-Givers and not Thanks –Keepers.

Phil.4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice