

**Ecclesiastes, II**

Before beginning our discussion of Ecclesiastes, let me make some final comments on Job. Is this book anti-wisdom? By that I mean, does it turn on its head the wisdom that we read elsewhere in Scripture? For example, Psalm 3:1, speaking of the righteous man, says, “He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season, whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” Is Job anti-wisdom? Is this book denying what was said in Psalms and Proverbs? Job, like the other wisdom books, underscores the premier principle of wisdom: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Job emphasizes that (Job 28:28). Thus it is not anti-wisdom in that respect. And when we talk about the righteous man prospering, as in Psalm 1, we need to understand that that does not have to do, necessarily, with the things that we have or even the experiences that we go through in this life. Rather, real prosperity is our relationship with God being strengthened through the relationships we have here. I would further say that “prospering” is accomplishing the mission that God has for us. And sometimes that mission, since we are soldiers of Christ, may involve injury, harm, and hurt. And yet we are accomplishing our mission, we are prospering. If we take it in that sense, then, Job is certainly not anti-wisdom. Job is very much in sync with the other wisdom books, such as Proverbs. The difference is a matter of emphasis. Proverbs, as Derek Kidner points out, is discussing that which lies at our feet, what we see at a close distance and can inspect rather clearly. Proverbs talks about what we can know. But the authors of Proverbs say, “Trust in the Lord, do not lean on your own understanding.” Do not lean on what you can know. “That you may fear the LORD, I teach you today, even you. That your trust may be in the Lord.” Proverbs itself mentions the limitations of our ability to sort everything out. Job, dealing with one of the deepest of life’s issues—why is it that the innocent suffer so greatly?—is casting its gaze to the distant horizon where things are rather fuzzy. And so the emphasis shifts to how much we do not understand and how often we do not have a clear view of the ways and purposes of God. Thus the difference is a matter of emphasis: Job emphasizes the limitations of our knowledge, Proverbs emphasizes what we can know. But both acknowledge the truth of the other, so Job is not anti-wisdom.

Some other major themes in Job include the freedom and sovereignty of God and how integrity is highly prized by God. It could be said that when God commends Job by calling him blameless and upright, that was God’s statement about what He knew He was accomplishing in Job’s life more than just a commendation of what Job was as a human being. Another theme is that, even in Job’s distress, God was sustaining him and enabling him to remain blameless and upright.

What have we learned from Job? We may want to be slower to speak in difficult situations, understanding the tumult and the confusion that these situations create. Our own belief in God can even sometimes magnify our struggle to know above atheists who are able to say, “Life is tough. We live in a dangerous world where bad things happen, and sometimes they happen to us.” They can ascribe their suffering to bad luck. But if we believe in a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing, and that is all we know of Him, when bad things happen it magnifies our suffering because we are thinking, “God, You could have prevented this. You could have done otherwise. Why did You not?” And that is where I think a book like Job really helps because Job asks those questions. God did not give him the answers, but I think Job knows now. I think our legitimate questions will ultimately be answered. What I learned from Job, though, is it is okay if I take some of my questions to the grave with me unanswered. What I really need is to learn to trust God. I do not trust God because I know it all, but rather I trust Him because He is God and He is real. Also, understanding that a cosmic story is being played out and somehow our earthly existence, including our suffering, is a part of that far larger story enables us to find meaning. I think we can go beyond existentialism and just sort of infusing meaning into our suffering; we can understand that there is a cosmic drama going on. In New Testament terms, “we struggle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.” Can we see them? No. Do we know the

significance of our actions day by day, in terms of that more important drama that is being played out? No, we do not know that. And that is why we are called upon, as Job was, to trust God. We must trust Him when we do not have all the answers. That brings rest to my soul. When I get up in the morning I realize that I may be confused today, I may be perplexed, I may suffer—or I may suffer injury—and I may not know why, but that is not my job. My job is simply to be faithful and to allow God to be God. God still is and I am still not.

Those who suffer deeply and trust God through hardship have treasures in their lives. They can share with others what they have learned from that deep suffering. Do we have to suffer in order to have those treasures to share? I think God's path of maturing differs from person to person. Suffering, we know, does deepen a person if a person responds in faith. In all of life whatever circumstances we confront we will be matured if we, by God's grace, respond in faith. "A man is tested by the praise he receives." A person can mature through the praise he receives if he responds to it by deflecting the glory to God. And likewise, suffering, if we respond to it appropriately, has a maturing effect in us. But suffering in and of itself is no guarantee that we will grow spiritually. Some people are embittered by what they suffer. The key is responding to whatever life brings our way in a godly fashion, by His grace. In this way our circumstances will enable us to grow closer to Him rather than drive a wedge between us and Him. Those who are called upon to suffer should see that not as God kicking them, but as God honoring them. I say that as a person who so far has not been called upon to suffer very much. Yet those whom God calls to suffer I see that as an honor to His most trusted servants. They are the ones He can trust with that, whereas some of the weaker ones of us may not be able to fare as well under those circumstances. I do think there is deep meaning in suffering—we comfort others with the comfort with which we have been comforted. We can help other people when we have been through things.

Let us turn now to the next of the speculative wisdom books, Ecclesiastes. Let us talk about what Ecclesiastes 7:28 means: "While I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all." Verse 29 has the word "upright" in it, and on that basis the translators may have chosen to use that word rather than "wise," "faithful," or "good" as the adjective. But let us leave the adjective aside for the moment and explore the key word in this passage, which is the verb *matsa* in Hebrew, "to find." In Ecclesiastes 7:24 this word is translated as "discover." This word appears also in verses 26 and 29 and twice in 27. So that is seven times in the space of six verses. That is the key word of this passage and perhaps of this section. Let us explore the range of meaning of "to find." It can also mean "discover," or "comprehend," which are both mental actions. This word for "find" can mean both literally finding something and also finding something out. In English we have many words that are like that. A good analogy would be the word grasp: "I am grasping your paper in my hands but I do not grasp the point you are making. Most often in Ecclesiastes *matsa* is used in this intellectual sense of finding out, figuring out, or grasping something. If we translate this verse as simply as possible, without adding adjectives, what might we come up with? "One man among a thousand I understand, but not a woman among them all." Now look at what he is saying. We could begin as early as 7:23: "All this I tested by wisdom and I said, 'I am determined to be wise'—but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound—who can discover [or find] it? So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly." See what he is after? The writer is trying to figure out the key to life, the grand scheme. And then I think he gives an example, and this makes some people think, "Now he is talking about women and he makes an unfavorable comparison and says men are better." But I think he is still trying to figure out the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. And being a man he says, "I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare." He does not say, "the woman, who is a snare." He is not

generalizing about women. He is speaking of a limited group of women. He finds women who are snares to be more bitter than death. That is madness and folly—to be ensnared by one of those women. And he is saying, “God help us, God protect me from such a woman.” And we should also pray for God to protect women from such men, for we all know they exist as well.

But then he goes on in verse 27 to say, “‘Look,’ says the Teacher, ‘this is what I have discovered [or found]: Adding one thing to another to discover [or find] the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not understanding [finding]—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.’” I think the phrase, “I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all,” is just an aside. I think he is saying, “I do not even understand my fellow human beings. I understand maybe one man in a thousand, but not a woman among them all.” That is a typical male sentiment, but it is not necessarily a misogynistic or chauvinistic statement. I think that when it comes to understanding women, men are inept. We have to be reminded of our considerable differences. For example, overall, men are literalists while women are intuitive. He is basically saying, “I was looking to find the key to life, the scheme of things. I was searching but not finding much, not understanding much. I only understand one man among a thousand, not a woman among them all. But I am certain of this one thing: God made mankind upright but men have gone in search of many schemes.”

That really fits his argument to this point. He is saying, “There is only one thing I know for sure. It is not God’s fault. He got it right, but we blew it. That is an important theological conviction to come to; it is not insignificant. But he is saying, “I really have not figured out much. I am on this quest for wisdom, but it is far too profound. Who can find it out? Who can figure it out?”

As I was saying, men often do not understand women. We are different, and here is an example that I heard once that I think illustrates it. Imagine that my wife tells me she needs a pair of white shoes and asks me if I would go shopping with her. I am thinking, since she said she needed white shoes, that she wants me to go with her to help her accomplish this task. We have a job. As a man I am concerned with being adequate. I desire to be adequate and I am terribly threatened and become defensive immediately if anyone accuses me of being inadequate. So she says, “Would you go shopping with me? I need to buy a pair of white shoes.” We go to the store, and I calculate in my mind, “I know where there are three shoe stores within our price range. They are all within five minutes of each other, and they are all ten minutes from our house. Therefore, including drive time, we should be able to find, flush out, purchase and bag a pair of white shoes, even if she is very particular, within two-and-a-half hours. Then I will prove my adequacy as a husband because I will fulfill her request. But she is not thinking about the quest for the white shoes. She is thinking, “I would like to spend a little time with you. I need some white shoes, but I really just want to spend time with you. And so when we are at the store I am focused on looking for white shoes. I find the white shoes available in her size, pull them out, and say, “Look at this, this is nice. This is your size; what is wrong with it?” “Well, what about this one?” I keep pulling out white shoes and she does not want to buy any of them. I begin to get frustrated, and by the end of the time I am thinking, “She is just trying to provoke me. She never meant to buy any shoes in the first place; she is just wasting time. She is wasting my time, and this has dragged on for four hours now. We have bought no white shoes—this mission could end in total failure. And she is thinking to herself, “What a jerk! Why did I want to spend the afternoon with him in the first place?” This is a story that illustrates how men and women are different. How can we help ourselves over that? I think there is much in North American culture that says, except for a few obvious physical differences, men and women are exactly the same. I think that is an improper view of God’s creative genius in creating men and women. There is a great commonality to our humanness, but there is a wonderful distinctiveness in the way we are built and in the way we think. As we learn to understand the way the other thinks, if she

says, "Would you come with me to buy some white shoes?" I think, "That is what she said, but what does she really want? What is she interested in?" And it does not take too much cleverness to realize she might just want to spend some time together. And on the other hand, she realizes that I am a man and a literalist. So she does me a favor by saying, "Look, I would really love to spend the afternoon together. Can we go shopping? And if we happen to find some white shoes, that would be great." This helps me, as a man, to read between the lines and understand that she really wants to spend some time together. I think that is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is referring to, just that common, simple male sentiment. "I hardly even understand my fellow men, and women remain a mystery to me."

The main problem with my interpretation is that no one has seemed to have thought of it. It always makes me nervous when no one has previously interpreted something the way I do. But the fact that "to find," or "to find out, discover" is such a key word in Ecclesiastes makes me fairly confident in this interpretation of the passage. We can get a sense of the overarching thematic structure of the book of Ecclesiastes by graphing the frequency of a couple of key words. What word, more than any other, do you associate with Ecclesiastes? Perhaps "vanity" or "meaninglessness." The first half of the book is seeking for the meaning of life, the meaning that we can find in our toil under the sun. "What does a man gain for all his toil under the sun?" and the writer comes to the conclusion that it is pretty much meaningless, in an ultimate sense. I can earn all this money and fame, but death will catch up to me, and when it does I may hand over my inheritance to a fool. What good has my money and fame done for me ultimately? So in the beginning of the book he is searching for meaning, the key to life under the sun, and he comes to the conclusion that it is all meaningless, in an ultimate sense. It is all vanity. But in the second half of the book, the key word is "to find." This is because in the second half he is talking about what he has not found. This key word, *matsa*, "to find," peaks in occurrence in this section that we were dealing with. That is not a conclusive reason to accept my interpretation, but I think that serves as some confirmation of what we were arguing. And we were mainly arguing that he is not saying that men are one-thousandth better than women. I think he is saying not that he has found men to be better, but that he has found them to be minimally more understandable. He has comprehended maybe one man in a thousand, and women remain a mystery to him. He has not found very much in his quest to understand: "I understand one man in a thousand, and I do not understand a single woman among them all."

It has been asked, could this be an admission of the fact that he is not very perceptive? It makes more sense to me to understand this as simply an example of how futile his quest has been. "That which should be comprehensible to me, my fellow human beings, I have not been able to understand. I can figure out maybe one man in a thousand. People even baffle me, much less finding the key to life."