

Eat, Drink and Be Merry

I was asked recently to examine the following questions:

- Jesus did not care much for the attitude of eat, drink, and be merry (Luke 12:19). Solomon, however, did not take that point of view (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:13; 5:18-20; etc.).
- How is the word “spirit” used in Ecclesiastes?
- Why would Solomon use the word “vanity” in relation to the good God has done (for instance, as in 1:13-14; 2:24-26; 6:1-2; etc.)?

We will examine these questions one by one.

Question 1: Jesus did not care much for the attitude of eat, drink, and be merry (Luke 12:19). Solomon, however, did not take that point of view (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:13; 5:18-20; etc). Was either one wrong? How can we apply the words of each to harmonize them? How do the words of Solomon relate to the idea of contentment?

First of all, let us examine the passages cited. Luke 12:19 is part of a parable that begins in verse 16 and ends in verse 21, so I am including all of these verses to understand better the passage in its context.

- 16. And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully;**
- 17. and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'**
- 18. And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods.**
- 19. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' '**
- 20. But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'**
- 21. So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."**

Now, the passages from Solomon in Ecclesiastes:

"There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;"
(Ecclesiastes 2:24)

". . . also that it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil." (Ecclesiastes 3:13)

18. Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot.

19. Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil – this is the gift of God.

20. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

“And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat, and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do.” (Ecclesiastes 9:7)

I do not believe Jesus was contradicting what the Preacher was saying in the slightest. Jesus Himself admitted to His having a reputation as a man who enjoyed His meals. As He says in Matthew 11:18-19,

18. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon';

19. the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

We also know that during His ministry it was not His or His disciples' custom to fast:

14. Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

15. And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Matthew 9:14-15)

But since He began His ministry by fasting for 40 days and 40 nights and then being tempted severely by Satan, one can see how much more Jesus might appreciate the blessings of food and drink.

In the *Parable of the Rich Fool* of Luke 12, Jesus was not condemning one's enjoying life and eating, drinking and making merry. Neither was He condemning planning ahead for the future with material goods and possessions. What He

was condemning was leaving God out of one's plans. This is summed up in His concluding statement of the parable,

20. "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

21. So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Jesus was reminding His audience and us as well that we should put God first in every aspect of our lives. All of our planning will come to naught if we fail to take care of first things first. As He said in Matthew 6:33,

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

Solomon was reminding his audience to be content with the good things of this life. Work is honorable, and it always has been. Even before sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden, God's desire was for man to work:

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Genesis 2:15)

Christian readers, after they have shaken off the initial shock of reading Ecclesiastes, have often described it as a defense of the faith or even an evangelistic work. Ecclesiastes shows that many of the pursuits of life, including wealth, education, and power, do not really fulfill. In that way Ecclesiastes shows that life without God is meaningless and drives the reader to faith. This, too, is in complete harmony with Jesus' teaching in the *Parable of the Rich Fool*.

Many readers have pointed out how much stark skepticism is found in Ecclesiastes. If Ecclesiastes is an apologetic work, it is surely unlike any other defense of the faith ever written. But the defensive and evangelistic purpose of Ecclesiastes is clearer if one takes into account its original audience. It needs to be studied in its proper context. A careful study of the text demonstrates conclusively that its first readers were not "ordinary" people but the wealthy, the powerful, and those who had access to the royal court. Again and again it deals with the study of wisdom (which the average person did not have time to do), the value of wealth, and the problems involved in being in the king's court. These things did not apply as issues in the lives of most ordinary people.

Addressed to the intellectual and political elite of Israel, the book's "pessimism" makes sense. These people would be the most susceptible to falling under the spell of materialism. It was speaking to the very people who were most likely to build their lives on success, wealth, power, and an intellectual reputation. Ecclesiastes repeatedly points out the futility of such a way of life and urges the readers to face their need for God. In that sense, Ecclesiastes is indeed evangelistic and in fact can be read profitably by anyone.

Ecclesiastes should not be called pessimistic or cynical, but it is brutally realistic. In particular, Ecclesiastes makes the reader confront the full and dreadful significance of death. Most people, whether or not they are religious, refuse to face what death really is: a calamity that nullifies the achievements of human life. Ecclesiastes strips away the myths we use to shield ourselves from this stark fact.

In pointing out the dreadfulness of death, Ecclesiastes helps us see how profound is our need for resurrection. More simply, Ecclesiastes drives us to Jesus Christ. The New Testament shares this perspective. Death is not a friend or even a doorway but a terrible enemy. It will be, however, a conquered enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26; 1 Corinthians 15:54-55; Revelation 20:14).

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26)

54. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

55. “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)

“Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire;” (Revelation 20:14)

Question 2: How is the word “spirit” used in Ecclesiastes? Include in this all synonyms and comparable phrases.

As far as I could ascertain, all the references to the "spirit" in Ecclesiastes are a designation of the vital force that gives life both to human beings and animals. Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 is a good example of this:

18. I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts.

19. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity.

20. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

21. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the Earth?

According to *Strong's Concordance*, the word translated ***spirit*** in Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word ***ruwach***, meaning wind; by resemblance breath, i.e., a sensible (or even violent) exhalation; figuratively, life, anger, unsubstantiality; by extension, a region of the sky; by resemblance spirit, but only of a rational being (including its expression and functions). Here is but a sampling of various passages in the Old Testament where ***ruwach*** is used:

“The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”
(Genesis 1:2)

“Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.’” (Genesis 6:3)

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more.” (Numbers 11:25)

“And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him; so the people of Israel obeyed him, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.” (Deuteronomy 34:9)

***13. Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men,
14. dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake.
15. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh stood up.
16. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice:*** (Job 4:13-16)

Ecclesiastes seems to anticipate some of the problems that Paul faced defining the use of the spiritual gifts found in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Those who believe that God has spoken through the Holy Spirit in dreams and visions (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21) to them would do well in following the Preacher's counsel: not all dreams communicate God's wishes to us:

“For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.” (Ecclesiastes 5:3)

It seems as if Paul had these kinds of reserves in mind when he speaks in 1 Corinthians 14:29 of the gifts of tongues and prophecy, recommending that an orderly manifestation of this nature might be followed by a judgment on the part of the assembly. Perhaps this may have been what the Apostle John had in mind as well when he wrote in 1 John 4:1,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

Also, the Preacher's emphasis in Ecclesiastes on reverence and obedience to God seems to anticipate the Apostle Paul's interest in the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:5). True spiritual gifts – genuine manifestations of messages or miraculous actions – should be maintained within a spirit of reverence to God's glory through Christ and for the edification of the believers.

Question 3: Why would Solomon use the word “vanity” in relation to the good God has done (for instance, as in 1:13-14; 2:24-26; 6:1-2; etc.)?

13. And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under Heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with.

14. I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:13-14)

24. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;

25. for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

26. For to the man who pleases Him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

1. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon men:

2. a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction. (Ecclesiastes 6:1-2)

Ecclesiastes declares the absolute vanity of all things under the sun. Biblical vanity does not refer to an excessive care on good looks. Biblical vanity is *emptiness* or *worthlessness*. But as we mentioned previously, this seeming “pessimism” is predicated on **God being left out of one’s life**. It refers to the emptiness of life; in fact, of meaning of any sort, if God is left out of the picture and there is no eternity or Heaven. Psalms 39:5-6 and 62:9 touch upon this as well:

5. Behold, Thou hast made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in Thy sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath!

6. Surely man goes about as a shadow! Surely for naught are they in turmoil; man heaps up, and knows not who will gather! (Psalm 39:5-6)

“Men of low estate are but a breath, men of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.” (Psalm 62:9)

Two keys will help in understanding this total vanity as taught in Ecclesiastes:

First of all, this vanity refers only to those things that are ***under the sun***. The phrase ***under the sun*** occurs 29 times in the book while ***under Heaven*** occurs three times. The book does not declare **eternal** or **heavenly** things to be vanity – only those things connected to this Earth and limited by time. Only those things to which men still cling that are perishable are what is described as being vain.

Secondly, this *vanity* deals with permanent, not temporary, value. Something is vain if it brings no ultimate value. The book emphasizes profit as is demonstrated in passages such as Ecclesiastes 1:3; Ecclesiastes 3:9; and Ecclesiastes 5:16. Many things on Earth have a temporary value and are not evil in themselves. However, when these things are examined in the light of eternity, they are worthless or vain. Consider these verses:

“Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit has a man of all his labor which he takes under the sun?’
(Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)

Now, from our Lord:

“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

Indeed, all becomes pointless and vain when we remove the Lord from our plans and our lives!