

Ecclesiastes: An apologetics of despair

by Dr. Ted Van Raalte


Ecclesiastes is full of despair. It's in this context that the Teacher states in chapter 3 that God tests man. I would translate 3:18 as, "This happens *for the sake of* the sons of men, so that God may test them and they may see for themselves that they are like animals" (partly based on HCSB). God tests. God has a purpose in putting this world under a curse (Rom 8:20–21). He actually wants to drive people to a sense of futility. "What is the point?" they have to ask. The Teacher continues in 3:19–21, *For the fate of people and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. Who knows if the spirit of people rises upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? (HCSB)*

There's a very valuable lesson here for our defense of the faith. It has to do with the claims of other religions and ideas. Evolution makes it plain: there is no afterlife. Other religions claim there is, but they can't ground their claim in any real hope.


Gently but firmly, we have to press home this point with others. What is your hope? How do you know? Do you have a god who can carry you across the threshold of death? Has he ever done that for anyone? Can you prove it?

Ecclesiastes says they can't. On their principles all these passages are absolutely true: 2:14, "The wise man . . . the fool . . . the same fate overtakes them both." 6:6, "Do not all go to the same place?" 6:12, "Who can tell . . . what will happen under the sun after he is gone?" And finally, 4:2–3 argues that one not yet born is better than anyone alive because all who are

alive know they will die. Death and taxes . . . the two surest things in life (so goes the saying).



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I once met a man in hospice. As I was caring for a parishioner, his wife, his son, and I were singing Psalms quietly while he was in coma. The elderly gentleman on the other side of the curtain, also in hospice, was on the phone. He began to complain loudly in a German accent that we were singing some stupid Christian songs. We continued. His phone call ended. So I moved the curtain and asked him if our songs were bothering him. He was a little embarrassed, but this gave a wonderful opportunity for some gentle but firm apologetics. His opinion was that these songs were just silly hope. There is no heaven. We all emerged from a slimy soup millions of years ago and are genetically related to all other living beings. His ground was the theory of evolution. The death of a human being is no different than the death of a cow, he asserted. Well, I countered, then why not just let us have our little dream and hope. No harm done! As we talked more, he complained about a recent public scandal of someone's sexual misdeeds. I asked him why this should matter on his view of the world. He admitted it shouldn't. And why should it matter if someone would murder him? It shouldn't. It really shouldn't, for the

same fate overtakes all living beings. Nothing makes the human more valuable than a cow. You're just a body, like a farm animal, like your pet. You won't survive death.

You see? God tests us. He forces people to push their positions to their proper hopeless conclusions. This must happen, to make the soul cry out for what it needs but can't find. This is very important for apologetics. It's called an apologetics of despair.

Jesus Christ is your living hope.
Witnesses saw him die. They buried him
in despair. But he gave them back their
hope when he rose from the dead.

Unbelievers are without hope because they don't have the Son of God. They don't have the resurrected Jesus. They have no living example of someone who actually is living forever. They have no person they can truly point to who is already across the threshold of death but is alive. They do not have a living hope. If you are a Christian, you do! Yes, you do! Jesus Christ is your living hope. Witnesses saw him die. They buried him in despair. But he gave them back their hope when he rose from the dead. He purposefully showed himself to many witnesses. They recorded it. Question them if you wish, but they'll say the same thing over and over. They did. They said it in Scripture over and over. He is alive! He lives! Jesus Christ is the one!

In one of its more positive sections, Ecclesiastes answers the problem of 3:18–21 with some revelation from above the sun. The Teacher points to the hope of faith that comes through promise when he writes, "Remember your Creator . . . before the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:1–7). Death still happens,

underlining the transitory and ephemeral nature of life (12:8), but the Teacher already knew that the spirit of those who remember their Creator goes back to God who gave it. This is an expression of hope in the conquering of death through Jesus Christ our Lord.

On the cross Jesus himself told the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." After the Christ had borne all our suffering on the cross, he died. His body was returned to the dust, but of his soul he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:43). As soon as he died, he was released from his suffering. He went to the Paradise of God. Soon after this the thief on the cross joined him there. And soon after that Jesus went to receive his new, resurrected body. The thief on the cross is still awaiting his new body, but he knows with all the certainty of a soul that is satisfied in the presence of Christ, that he will receive that new body. It's all certain in Christ.

As for the man in hospice, we didn't just leave him in despair, but also spoke of the confidence and hope that would be his if he would repent and adopt the view of the world that is truly revolutionary for sinners—the one proclaimed by Jesus and secured by him. I can at least say that he was intrigued and wanted to talk again.

Believers know by faith the things that God has revealed from above the sun, the wonderful things found in Holy Scripture. We are not left in despair. But whoever seriously reflects on life apart from Christ ultimately finds only despair, and this is something Scripture also teaches us, especially in Ecclesiastes.



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