Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Ecclesiastes

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Summary

The viewpoint of the Book: the wise man's search for happiness under the sun, and his dicovery

The Book of Ecclesiastes is, up to a certain point, the converse of the Book of Proverbs. (see note to Proverbs) It is the experience of a man who — retaining wisdom, that he may judge of all — makes trial of everything under the sun that could be supposed capable of rendering men happy, through the enjoyment of everything that human capacity can entertain as a means of joy. The effect of this trial was the discovery that all is vanity and vexation of spirit; that every effort to be happy in possessing the earth, in whatever way it may be, ends in nothing. There is a cankerworm at the root. The greater the capacity of enjoyment, the deeper and wider is the experience of disappointment and vexation of spirit. Pleasure does not satisfy, and even the idea of securing happiness in this world by an unusual degree of righteousness, cannot be realised. Evil is there, and the government of God in such a world as this, is not in exercise to secure happiness to man here below — a happiness drawn from the things below and resting on their stability; though as a general rule it protects those who walk with God: "Who is he that shall harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?"* There is no allusion to the truth that we are dead in sins and offences. It is the result in the mind of the writer of the experience which he has gone through, and which he sets before us. As to the things around us, there is nothing better than to enjoy the things which God has given us; and finally, the fear of Jehovah is the whole of man, as the rule of his walk on earth. His own capacities do not make him happy nor the gratifying of his own will, even when he has everything at command. "For what can the man do that comes after the king?" Man fails to secure joy; and permanent joy is not to be found for man. Consequently, if there be any joy, it is with the sense that it cannot be retained. {* Peter's epistles, after laying the foundation of redemption and being born again, are occupied with the degree in which what was immediate (in promise) among the Jews is applicable now. The first epistle, its application to saints; the second, to the world and the wicked here below: hence he goes on to the new heavens and the new earth.

Wisdom and folly in this world and their end

The moral of this book goes even farther than that of the Proverbs — on one side at least; for we must remember that it is this world that is in question (under the sun). Wisdom avails no more than folly. The difference between them is as great as that between light and darkness. But one event happens to all men, and much reflection only makes us hate life. The heart becomes weary of research, and after all one dies like another. The world is ruined as a system, and death cuts the thread of thoughts and projects, and annihilates all connection between the most skilful workman and the fruit of his labours. What profit has been to him? There is a time for all things, and man must do each in its season, and enjoy that which God gives on his way. But God is the same in all His works, that men should fear before Him. He knows that God will judge the righteous and the wicked; but, as far as man's knowledge extends, he dies as the beast dies, and who can tell what becomes of him afterwards? There is no question here of the revelation of the world to come, but only of the conclusions drawn from experience of what takes place in this world. The knowledge of God teaches that there is a judgment; to man all is

darkness beyond the present life.

Injustice and unredressed wrongs

Ecclesiastes 4 expresses the deep sorrow caused by the crying injustice of a sinful world, the unredressed wrongs which compose the history of our race, and which, in fact, make the history of man insupportable to one who has a sense of natural justice, and creates the desire to put an end to it. Labour and sloth alike bring their quota of distress. Nevertheless, in the midst of this quicksand in which there is no standing, we see the thought of God arise, giving a firm foundation to heart and mind.

God over all in government and judgment

This is in the beginning of Ecclesiastes 5. He demands respect from man. The folly of the heart is indeed folly in His presence. From thence onward we find that that which takes away the vain hope of earthly happiness gives a more true joy to the heart that becomes wise, and therefore joyful, in separating itself from the world. There is therefore the grace also of patience. The self-sufficient effort to be righteous only ends in shame; to be active in evil ends in death. Finally, to strive after wisdom by the knowledge of things below is labour in vain. He has found two things: first, with respect to woman, judged by the experience of the world, he has found none good; amongst men, one in a thousand; and, in a word, that God made man upright, but he has sought out many inventions apart from God.

God must be honoured, and the king also, to whom God has given authority. We see too in Ecclesiastes 9 and 10, how little everything here meets the apparent capacity of man; and, even when this capacity is real, how little it is esteemed. Nevertheless the wisdom of the upright, and the folly of the fool, have each its own consequences, and, after all, God judges. To sum up the whole, God must be remembered, and that before weakness and old age overtake us. For the manifest conclusion of all that has been said is "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man."

Submission and obedience to God the principle of all true wisdom

The chief subject, then, of this Book is the folly of all man's efforts in seeking happiness here below, and that the wisdom which judges all this only renders man still more unhappy. And then all this experience, on the part of one who possessed the highest capacity, is put in contrast with the simple principle of all true wisdom — submission and obedience to God, who knows all things, and who governs all things, because "God shall bring every work into judgment."

The only rule of life

If we remember that this Book gives us the experience of man, and the reasonings of man, on all that happens under the sun , there is no difficulty in those passages that have the semblance of infidelity. The experience of man is necessarily infidel. He confesses his ignorance; for beyond that which is seen, experience can know nothing. But the solution of all moral problems is above and beyond that which is seen. The Book of Ecclesiastes makes this manifest. The only rule of life then is to fear the God who

disposes of our life, who judges every action all the days of the life of our vanity. There is no question, in this book, of grace or of redemption, but only of the experience of this present life, and of that which God has said with respect to it — namely, His law, His commandments, and the consequent judgment — that which is decreed to man.

A Jew under the law might say these things, after having had the experience of all that God could give man to favour him in this position, and in view of the judgment of God that is connected with it.

The difference between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

In Proverbs we have practical moral guidance through the world; in Ecclesiastes the result of all efforts of man's will to find happiness, with all means at his disposal. But in the whole inquiry in Ecclesiastes there is no covenant relationship, no revelation. It is man with his natural faculties, and such as he is, conscious indeed he has to say to God, but seeking by his own thoughts where happiness is to be found. Only that conscience has its part in the matter, and the fear of God is owned at the end. It is God owned indeed, but man in the world with full experience of all in it.