

# Enjoyment with a dark side

**What is the Preacher (Ecclesiastes) well known for? Ten to one you will quote ‘vanity of vanities’. This is not surprising, for it is a recurring refrain throughout the whole of his wise sayings. And the terse expressions are encapsulated by the provoking statement: utterly meaningless (NIV), or as in the new Dutch translation (NBV): ‘air and emptiness, says the Preacher, everything is just emptiness’ (1:2 and 12:8, freely translated). This reminds us of Abel (it is the same Hebrew word that the Preacher uses for ‘vanity’), the first man who died, and of how he died. What is life? Is it not fleeting, temporary, disappointing, yes even pointless? Is it worth the effort?**

This last question is the exact question the Preacher poses himself in 1:3. If life is so fleeting, what then is the advantage of living under the sun? This question is approached from various standpoints (2:11ff; 3:9; 3:19; 5:8; 6:8; 7:11; 10:11). Now the Preacher would never deny that human activity produces something, he just emphasises its temporary character, especially because of death. He emphasises repeatedly how little remains of what man has accomplished. Yet this demonstration does not lead to a pessimistic view of life. I would even say: on the contrary. Life, as he sees it, is absolutely worth living: enjoy it! The positive sides of life have firm boundaries, to be sure, and become clouded, but the negatives do not remove them. Even though there is no lasting advantage because of death, the Preacher nevertheless recommends that life be enjoyed as much as possible!

## **Enjoy life!**

This is not just a casual comment. The call to enjoy life is a continuing refrain. As many as seven times he recommends life be enjoyed, especially the seemingly little things of life. It is striking that as you continue reading the book, the call becomes more powerful. The first time it is just a simple observation that ultimately, man has nothing left to him but to eat and to drink and find enjoyment in what God’s hand offers us (2:24ff). Then in 3:12, the observation is presented as a result of knowledge. After he has considered much, the Preacher comes to the following conclusion. If man takes delight, and finds satisfaction in all his toil, it is a gift from God. He goes on to state that he has come to the conclusion that this indeed is still the best, after having had a good look at many things (3:22).

The fourth time that the call comes to the fore is in 5:18 where he draws attention by using one little phrase: take note! (let op! in Dutch Translation) Here is what I have seen (NKJV) and realised (NIV): that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to enjoy all good as a gift of God. The Preacher is realistic, nevertheless, and admits that this enjoyment cannot be separated from the necessary toil. In 8:15, the signal is even stronger; the conviction is growing, as it were. The recommendation now sounds enthusiastic: So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad...

It is not just a recommendation, it even becomes a charge. In 9:7-9, it nearly sounds like a command. The Preacher presses the point, convinced of the wisdom for life: eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart! This conviction is underlined with a confirmation from God Himself: God favours what you do. Finally, in 11:9, the young man is personally addressed: be happy young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth!

## **Misinterpretation**

How often have there not been sermons preached on this last verse as though this was only intended for the youth? Characteristic of this was the antithesis that was created, partly due to the customary translation. Enjoy yourself, *but* remember that you will one day have to give account. There is really no reason to translate it as an antithesis here, however. It is much more plausible to translate it as: *and* remember that you will have to give account of your joy (Nieuwe Bijbel Vertaling

2004). Whether you enjoyed the moments of your life that *could* be enjoyed! Undoubtedly, there will be difficult days that will threaten to embitter your life. The Preacher is realistic enough to acknowledge this. However, the question is whether you seized the good chances and opportunities with both hands. This speaks of wisdom and the art of living.

### **God given joy**

Thus the charge to the young man does not stand on its own, but is deeply rooted in the whole of the Preacher's thoughts. It is my conviction that the connection between these seven hinges of the book is the manner in which God is spoken of. It is He who gives the joy in the small pleasures that life offers. He is the one who holds happiness in His hand and who shares it out. Repeatedly we hear about: the hand of God (2:24), the gift of God (3:13), man's lot (from God) (3:22). Or it is literally stated that God gives joy, in this life (5:18; 8:15). Ultimately, in 12:1 it reaches the climax: God is the Creator. Remember your Creator in a personal bond with Him. Enjoyment of life is a gift from the Creator and can only really be received in a living association with Him.

It is noticeable that in all these calls, the shadow of death is present. For this reason people have spoken of a *carpe-diem*-motive: *make hay while the sun shines* for tomorrow we die. This would do no justice to the Preacher. He always makes his positive recommendation after the diagnosis of a complex situation or after a disappointing experience. But not in order to set the one up against the other.

### **Balance in God's hands**

In the wise observations of the Preacher, I recognise a triple-plaited cord: the fleeting character of life, the joy of life that remains, the shadow of death. Each of these three lines is connected to God. The joy of life is a personal gift from God. The temporary character of human activity contrasts with the permanence of His work! (In Ecclesiastes, God's work is never described as 'vanity')! And it is God who controls death and decides the moment of death. God Himself maintains the tense unity of it all and has a grip on reality as no other (3:1-11).

The positive in life is placed next to the negative, without relief of tension. The joy of living is and remains a concrete gift from above. The shadow of death is the black border around life's joy, but does not take it away. For man finds his ultimate destination in God the Creator. The breath of life returns to God who gave life (12:1 and 12:7). No matter how much life has been scarred by Abel-like experiences, thank God He did not deprive Adam's children of all pleasures and enjoyments. To say it provokingly, in the style of the Preacher: life without a grain of joy is atheism, practically.

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This article was originally published as '*Genieten met een donker randje (Prediker)*' in: Koert van Bekkum a.o. (Eds.), *Gods Woord in mensentaal. Denken over het gezag van de Bijbel*, Barneveld: Nederlands Dagblad 2003, pp. 162-165

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