

ECCLESIASTES IS A REMARKABLE little book about how to find contentment—and how not to find it.

For my own part, I'm just now realizing that I have not been allowing Solomon to say what he really wants to say all these years. Seems the story I brought along with me kept drowning out *his* story.

But now I'm in pretty much the same boat he was in when he wrote it. I'm getting a little long in the tooth myself and trying to stay away from mirrors. And as a result, his amazing book is starting to come into focus for me in an entirely new way.

I'll call my story the *justice narrative*. It goes something like this: the just and the good are rewarded and the wicked get what's coming to them. Ecclesiastes is the antidote to that story. In fact it shows what happens when such stories fall apart—the devastating impact this can have on identity.

You'll remember Solomon as a younger man, full of his proverbs. The justice narrative was strong in him. But as an old man he has seen far too many things. The justice narrative has begun to take on

water, and he finds himself casting about, a little desperately, for something to grasp onto.

Without knowing it, I have been keeping Solomon in a box. His name means “peace,” and maybe I wanted his book to fit into certain peaceful dreams I had about things. He is described as the wisest man in the world, and maybe I wanted his book to glorify wisdom, as he does in Proverbs.

I used to enjoy reading lovers of wisdom like Plato and Aristotle, the philosophers. They wrote beautifully about how to find happiness. Their books were like a dream, full of sweet words and pleasant assurances; and perhaps that is what I wanted Ecclesiastes to be. But that is not what it is at all.

Looking back, I suppose I might also have been defensive about the church, or perhaps guilty of the presumption of thinking it needed me to save it, like Uzzah. It may have been this vanity that prevented me from allowing poor old Solomon to be himself or say what he wanted to say.

The way to make a church look good is to make it look successful. Build a massive cathedral, have a

megachurch and a choir, do exciting programs, wow everyone with your preaching, present a smiling face to the world, etc. But Solomon has something simple to say about that. All is vanity.

And he was the expert. He built the most famous church of all.

The problem is the naked God on the cross. You cannot be naked and also be successful in the world. On the cross, Christ appeared to be a miserable failure. Even his own disciples deserted him. We tend to gloss over this uncomfortable fact on our way to making things shiny and nice.

It occurs to me that I haven't been looking at Christ at all, up there on his crucifix. I've been nodding at him all my life without realizing he was naked. Because I did not see he was naked, I also did not see how much he was suffering. I thought it was about the nails, but that was only physical.

He had a much deeper pain, which was his shame. He was hung up naked for all the world to see. "He that is hanged is accursed by God." His enemies

laughed at him and triumphed over him. Apparently his notion of success was not their notion of success.

We talk in the church about standing at the foot of the cross, but maybe we should try looking at it from his point of view, hanging up there naked. Maybe we should think less about ourselves and where we happen to be standing and try to comprehend his deep shame.

Why? Because we are all headed to the same place. There is “one event” in which we are all naked, whether or not we want to admit it. Solomon found himself approaching this event and saw his nakedness very clearly. That’s what his little book is all about.

The people standing at the foot of the cross saw their stories falling apart before their very eyes. The one they called “lord” now seemed powerless and frankly ridiculous. Until then, they had very different notions about him. They thought of him as a conqueror in the style of Joshua or David.

To see Christ on the cross was to be deprived of a story that was the source of identity and pride. It was

to enter into a state of being where nothing seems real, nothing seems solid. They were lost as they stood there looking up at him, but by looking up they were also found. This is a great mystery.

Nakedness became a source of shame in the garden because of sin, and nakedness is what we see in Solomon in Ecclesiastes. He may have been “arrayed in all his glory,” but in his old age he was utterly naked in another way, utterly powerless and ashamed of his weakness in one vital area.

And that is in the little matter of contentment. To see Solomon in his own words is to see a very unhappy man with no remedy in sight because he is old and has nowhere left to hide. This was doubly painful because he had cultivated the image of a wise man who knew how to make himself happy.

To the world, “wisdom” has a smiling face. It indicates that happiness has been found. But in Ecclesiastes wisdom has become a source of sorrow and vexation. Solomon is beginning to realize that wisdom is far off and cannot give him the peace he is so desperately seeking.

Aristotle wrote a charming book called the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It meanders along in its discursive way almost as if he were chatting to us in person. This discursiveness not only draws us into his argument but is also meant to represent his happiness, his contentment.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Aristotle cast a spell over the world. Whole ages of philosophy and even theology can be traced to his sunny influence. The spell consists of his unparalleled ability to convince us that happiness is a real thing—and he has found it.

This *spell* is just what we mean by “narrative.” Happiness is a cheerful tale cleverly told, and we are all under its spell. We do not have to read Aristotle to absorb it. The tale comes to us in innumerable ways, even in the underwear ad we see while watching football on dusky November afternoons.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* appears to be a book of philosophy when in fact it could also be called a very charming story. Happiness is the pretty girl, and we are all in love with her and caught up in pursuit of

her. The ending of the story is a satisfactory one. Happiness has been found.

But happiness is the very thing Solomon cannot find as he tosses and turns on his bed on dark nights. A young man may be proud of his good looks, but old age takes them away. A young man may be proud of his energy and industriousness, but the time will come when he will have to lay them both aside.

The pursuit of happiness is based on some desirable goal. The reason we keep our lawn perfect and our house clean is that those things seem desirable to us, or “good.” The reason we build a deck is we want to sit on it with our friends. The reason we aspire to promotion is we want more honor and money.

These things are desired not just for their own sake but for their presumed power to make us happy. They are part of what we are calling the narrative of happiness. But they are not happiness itself. We can find pleasure in them, to be sure, but not contentment; certainly not the peace we are seeking.

A guy sets out to put an addition on his house because he thinks his family needs more space and he wants to enhance the value of his property. He works hard on it, either building it himself or paying for it to be built. It seems good to him, desirable; otherwise he would not sacrifice so much.

But the addition cannot make him happy. If he built it himself, and it came out well, he can take a craftsman's pleasure in it, but even this is limited. The craftsman's highest pleasure is in crafting, which is linked to identity; he cannot enjoy the thing he made as much as the thing he is making.

He discovers that pleasure is not happiness. It is quite possible to find pleasure in the work his hands have done and still feel miserable and restless inside. And the pleasure he can receive from his work fades over the years with inevitable decay. His addition becomes subtraction.

Perhaps he feels compelled to continue to pursue the mirage of happiness with something new. But this new thing—even if it is the greatest addition in the world—will not make him happy either. It will



not give him what he desires most, as Solomon found out.

The reason is *identity*, which is at the root of the pursuit of happiness in all its forms. There are many things we love, but what we love the most is our identity (generally speaking). This love is the hidden spring of all the ambitious things we might do in pursuit of some presumed good.

Either we are living for pleasure—as some claim to do—and they are not happy either—or we are trying to build something, do something, make something, achieve something. All of that doing is nothing more than the surface of something that remains unseen but is real just the same.

“All people are like the grass.” Their lives are a momentary flowering in the vast continuum of time. This is the very thing that drives them to succeed. They want to do something and become someone before departing from this spinning orb, and a nagging little voice keeps driving them on.

But the same voice that drives them on will also never let them be content. Why did Beethoven write

nine symphonies? Wasn't the *Eroica* enough, that astonishing masterpiece? No, it most certainly was not enough; not if you're Beethoven. It can never be enough.

Solomon is not a moralist. In fact the amazing thing about Ecclesiastes is it has no moral. Perhaps this is why it can seem unsettling to Christians. We want a moral because it implies closure. Incidentally, it also intimates winners and losers, and is therefore linked to identity.

Don't bother looking for closure in this great book, however. It is certainly not immoral—far from it—but neither does it satisfy our desire to have things wrapped up in a neat little package. It is the raw data of existence as seen through the eyes of a man who is too old to dissemble.

We used to call literature of this type a “complaint.” It was not unique to Solomon. Here is his father: “My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then I spoke with my tongue, Lord, make me to know my end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am.”

Solomon looks back on his youth and his successes and realizes that “all is vanity.” He spent his life chasing after happiness only to discover in old age that he had not found it; that it was like chasing after wind. And then there was only one thing left for him, only one thing of which he was certain.

But that is the end of the story . . .