

“The Questions of God: 1) Does Life Make Sense?”

a sermon by

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Text: “Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

Two years ago Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr. published a book, entitled *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*. Dr. Nicholi is an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital. For a number of years Dr. Nicholi has taught a course at Harvard Medical School in which students examined the thoughts of Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis. Nicholi chose Freud and Lewis because Freud was an atheist and Lewis believed in the existence of God. Although these two men came to very different conclusions, both believed that the question of God was life’s most important question.

Sigmund Freud was one of the towering figures of the Twentieth Century. He is generally regarded as the father of modern psychiatry and his work, though often hotly debated, stands in a class by itself. Freud's conception of the mind and his discovery of what he called the id, the ego, and super ego remain as cornerstones of our understanding of the human mind. His interest in the subconscious and the importance of dreams marked the beginning of a whole new way of understanding the intimate relationship between the mind and the body.

Sigmund Freud did not believe in the existence of God. He could not reconcile the world of human suffering with a belief in a higher power. He also developed the notion that the whole concept of God is nothing but a projection of a childish wish for parental protection against the vicissitudes and sufferings of human existence.

C.S. Lewis approached the question of God from a different perspective. He was a celebrated teacher who taught English Literature at Oxford and Cambridge. He became one of the best known and loved spokesman for the Christian faith. Like Freud he believed that the question of God was the most important question in a person's life. On one occasion he wrote, "Here is a door behind which, according to some people, the secret of the universe is waiting for you. Either that's true or it isn't. If it isn't, then what the door really conceals is simply the greatest fraud...on record."

I.

One of the most remarkable, yet least understood books of the Bible is the Book of Ecclesiastes. It sounds a note that is unlike any other book in the Bible. The theme of Ecclesiastes is stated in the first chapter: "Vanity of vanity," says the Preacher, "All is vanity." The Hebrew word that is translated as "vanity" is the little word "hebel." It means air, vapor, or breath. Ecclesiastes believes human life is without meaning. In that regard Ecclesiastes stands very close to Sigmund Freud. Now Ecclesiastes is not an atheist. He affirms the existence of God. Moreover, he affirms: "For everything there is a season; a time for every purpose under heaven"(Ecclesiastes 3:2-9). He believes that God has made everything beautiful in its seasons. For Ecclesiastes the problem is not that God doesn't have any purpose for our lives. The problem is that we cannot discern that purpose.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is an experiment by which the author seeks to find meaning in life. He tries all of the same things that you and I try. He searches for meaning in wisdom, wealth, beauty, work, and in relationships. But in the end he comes up empty. There is nothing new under the sun, he observes. What has been is what will be. The rivers flow to the ocean but the seas remains the same. "Vanity of vanity," says the preacher, "all is vanity."

For many years people have struggled with the Book of Ecclesiastes. Often people ask, "How did such a dark book find its way into the canon of Scripture?" H. W. Wheeler once said that the book has about it "the smell of death."

And yet, at the end of the day, Ecclesiastes is a powerful witness to us. It reminds us that the questions of life are never easy, and that all human life has its ups and downs. There is often no real correlation of why the innocent often suffer and evil people go unpunished. It is a reminder to us of the tragic side of life and the struggle that faith always has to endure. For that reason the question of God inevitably involves us in the question of meaning.

II.

The Christian faith affirms that life has meaning first of all because God is the creator of the world and is the sovereign lord of all that is. That affirmation is found in the opening words of the Book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The creation stories in Genesis affirm that the world is good because God created it good and called it good. Through the years there have always been those who questioned whether creation was in fact good, but the church has always insisted that life had meaning because God created it good.

John Calvin, the great reformer of the Sixteenth Century, had a remarkable appreciation of creation and its unique beauty. In the Institutes of the Christian Religion Calvin writes:

"Has the Lord given to the flowers so great beauty that meets our eyes, so great sweetness of fragrance that flows upon our nose, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the pleasantness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble with loveliness by which they are rendered more precious than other metals or stone? Did he not, in short, render many things praiseworthy to us apart from their necessary use (*Institutes*, 3.10.2)?"

There is a beauty in our world that is present, even in the midst of so much suffering, pain, and sorrow. I was reminded of that this past week, when I talked to my mother on the telephone. She will be ninety years old next month, and her memory is not always what it was, but I am always amazed at what she does remember. Inevitably, when I talk to her, she asks about three things. She wants to know how my children are doing. Then she wants to know if the church is going well. Then she asks me if I am getting enough rest and exercise. I told her that I played tennis this past week and that I especially enjoyed the beautiful warm October afternoon. She then quoted a poem to me that I had not heard her quote in many years:

"O sun and skies and clouds of June, and flowers of May together.
Ye cannot rival for one hour October's bright, blue weather."

III.

But even as we speak of the beauty of creation, we are reminded that in the world God created there are often great injustices. Innocent people, good people, often suffer terrible illnesses, great sorrows, and sometimes some very bad things happen to people. In that sense Ecclesiastes is right. "All things come alike to all."

Jesus understood this. There is certain impartiality to life. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus noted, “God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends the rain on the just and unjust.”

Sometimes we view human suffering as a result of sin, and sin often creates great havoc in people’s life. But Jesus knew that not all suffering is the result of sin.

Several years ago I came across a sermon by William Sloane Coffin, entitled *Alex’s Death*. It was a sermon Coffin preached after his son Alex’s death in an automobile accident in Boston. In that sermon Coffin related an experience that happened the night after his son’s death. Coffin was sitting in the living room of his sister’s house in Boston, when a woman came into the house bringing food for the family. When she saw this grieving father, she looked at him and shaking her head, said, “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Somehow that statement triggered something in Coffin. “Instantly,” he said, “I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her.” “I’ll say you don’t, lady!” he said. “Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of ‘frosties’ too many?” “Do you think that it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?”

Coffin went on to say, “For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels.”

William Temple, the great Anglican theologian, once wrote that when some precious life is cut off by an accident, we should not say, “Why does God choose to do this?” God does not choose to do this: what God chooses is to create a world to which ‘this’ is incidental. And it is good for us that he does. But while God does not specifically choose that the accident should occur, God is ready to support both those who die and those who remain on earth with his loving presence.”

IV.

That is why the Christian faith has always affirmed that the real meaning of life is found not only in God’s creation of the world, but finally it is found in God’s redemption of the world in Jesus Christ. In his letter to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul wrote, “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39).

Paul Tillich once related a time when he was speaking to a group of Jewish refugees in the years after World War II. One of these Jews related an incident during the War in France when the Nazis had forced an evacuation of ten thousand elderly Jewish citizens to a

concentration camp. In the course of this evacuation most of them died even before they could get to the camp. In the light of that kind of suffering, noted this Jew, he could not force himself to believe in the divine Providence.

The New Testament speaks of these forces. Paul knew them all: the horror of death and the anxiety of life, the irresistible strength of natural and historic powers. He knew them as well as we know them.

But he knew something else. He knew of the power of God's love from which nothing can separate us. That is what we mean when we speak of the Providence of God. It is not the notion that everything always comes to a good end. Some things do not come to a good end. Providence does not mean that there is a divine planning by which everything is predetermined, as in an efficient machine. Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility in every situation that cannot be destroyed by an event. Tillich points out that it is not our suffering that destroys our faith in God's providence but the depth of our separation. That is why providence and forgiveness are not two separate aspects of the Christian faith; they are one and the same.

That is our hope--our only hope--that the God who created us is the one who has also redeemed us.

Thanks be to God! Amen