

Sunday January 10th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 2
“Misery Loves Company”

It has been on the internet for a long time now, but one of the more interesting postings out there, is something called the Darwin Awards. The name comes, of course, from Charles Darwin, and his theory of evolution. Darwinian evolution essentially says that only the fittest individuals of a species survive, thus passing on their genetics to the next generation. So, the fastest, smartest, etc., of any species will outlive those not so gifted.

The Darwin Awards is based on this idea of “survival of the fittest”, and the award’s reason for existence is that they report on people who do very stupid things, which ends their lives and thus their genetics can no longer be passed on. Namely their stupidity can not be passed on. To give you a flavour of what this website tries to do, here are a couple of more recent examples of award winners. They are real head shakers.

(8 March 2018, New Jersey) A Wanaquer man died in a vehicle fire after he drove around barricade cones, and onto live power wires in Franklin Lakes. A good son, Anthony G. was on route to his father's house to shovel the driveway. After the second nor'easter storm in a week, hundreds of thousands were left without power. Utility crews worked overtime to deal with downed trees and electric lines. Traffic snarls and frustrated motorists were everywhere. Anthony, wanting to get to his dad, did not want to lose time to a detour!

According to police, this winner simply navigated around the bright orange traffic cones warning motorists of a hazardous downed wire on Route 208. Responding to calls, officers arrived at 9AM to find the vehicle fully engulfed in flames. A live power line was sputtering in the roadway near the vehicle. The fire totally gutted the car, and the driver was pronounced dead at the scene. Ironically this Darwin Award winner was *employed as a New York City electrician*.

How about this one? (28 January 2018, Selangor Malaysia) Zaim Kosnan, while riding his motorbike, spotted a twelve-foot reticulated python dozing on the side of the road. "That sizeable snake is worth money!" Zaim concluded and so, the 35-year-old prepared for this windfall with gloves and a sickle. Sweet success! Swiftly was the first round won by Zaim, and triumphantly Zaim held the reptile's head high as he transported it home by motorbike. Picture that crazy scene.

Swinging in the air, the displeased captive made a counter-move, and subsequently wrapped its body round and round its captor, constricting in self-defence. Zaim swerved off the road and the results of Round Two became apparent to passers-by the next morning. They had to kill the 3.5-meter snake to free the man's body, and a post-mortem confirmed his death as strangulation.

The Darwin Awards remind us that all of us have done some foolish things in life, which friends or family members are more than ready to retell to anyone interested. When you do something that was not the best idea, we often say to ourselves, “how can I have been so stupid”? Or perhaps it is your parents who caught you doing something foolish and asked, “How could you have been so stupid”? Sometimes we do something that makes for a great anecdote to share later on after the immediate pain has passed.

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Well, what if we were doing something foolish, and we're not even aware of it? So oblivious, that we fail to see the pot hole right in front of us.

In our humanistic culture, people tend to lose sight of the meaning of life. They pursue many things, thinking that in these pursuits, they will find meaning and purpose. Some of these pursuits include business success, wealth, good relationships, sex, entertainment, and doing good to others. People have testified that, while they achieved their goals of wealth, relationships, and pleasure, there was still a deep void inside, a feeling of emptiness that nothing seemed to fill.

I don't suspect I am alone in these feelings. As famed psychiatrist Victor Frankl observed, humans often long for meaning, and yet sometimes find this urge can be difficult to satisfy. It is easy to be discouraged when comparing ourselves with others who appear to be accomplishing more, whether they are doing so in reality, or through a skewed portrait via social-media. Psychology Today Feb. 7, 2017

As part of his quest for "the good life," the Preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes, (I will refer to him as Preacher since authorship of Ecclesiastes is still debated) examined everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the great laboratory of life, he experimented with one thing after another, always applying the wisdom that God had given him (Ecclesiastes 2:3,9). In this second chapter, Preacher recorded three stages in his experiments as he searched for a satisfying meaning to life.

1. He asked: Can I be happy by having fun? (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3) A great number of people think this is a good idea. Preacher wrote, "*I said to myself, 'Go ahead, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy what is good.'*" *But it turned out to be futile.*" (Ecclesiastes 2:1, HCSB) Having too much fun prevents getting important things done. So, his conclusion was: pleasure has little value. "*I said about laughter, 'It is madness,' and about pleasure, 'What does this accomplish?'*" (Ecclesiastes 2:2) Preacher's question is, what does pleasure accomplish? The reply is again rhetorical, expecting a negative answer.

"I explored with my mind how to let my body enjoy life with wine and how to grasp folly —my mind still guiding me with wisdom—until I could see what is good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives." (Ecclesiastes 2:3,) Then Preacher turned to not just pleasure, but items that are associated with pleasure. First, he explored wine. He aspired to be what might be called a connoisseur of wine. Excessive drinking maybe excluded by the phrase "yet acquainting my heart with wisdom."

In this case, Preacher was trying to gratify his appetites. He indicates that he is following a careful process and that his heart is guiding him with wisdom. This is the reason he pursued laughter, wine, and foolish fun; it is because he wants to see what lasting value they have. In the end, compared to eternity, he discovers that it is a waste of time. Then Preacher asked: can I be happy by working hard? (Ecclesiastes 2:4-11) Our Preacher worked hard in various ways.

First, he started various work projects like housing projects. "*I increased my achievements. I built houses ...*" (Ecclesiastes 2:4) Preacher claimed he built many houses.

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Then he took on horticultural projects “...and planted vineyards for myself. I made gardens and parks for myself and planted every kind of fruit tree in them.” (Ecclesiastes 2:4–5) Preacher planted many vineyards, parks, and gardens. He planted many trees.

Then he dabbled in hydrological projects “I constructed reservoirs of water for myself from which to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees.” (Ecclesiastes 2:6) Preacher built many water projects. One of the projects undertaken was probably the King’s Pool mentioned in Nehemiah. “I went on to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but farther down it became too narrow for my animal to go through.” (Nehemiah 2:14) Then, the Preacher increased the worth of his wealth by expanding his businesses. In the end it was vanity, worthless.

He asked: can I be happy by accumulating wisdom and influence? (Ecclesiastes 2:12-26) By now you can reason out what answer he came up with. If I can’t make myself any happier by my personal pursuits; “Then I turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly, for what will the man be like who comes after the king? He will do what has already been done.” (Ecclesiastes 2:12) The immediate answer is that accumulating wisdom and influence does not help a person any more than anyone else.

Perhaps like the Preacher we can be more prepared for eternity. “And I realized that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, like the advantage of light over darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also knew that one fate comes to them both.” (Ecclesiastes 2:13–14) The only value of these pursuits, and especially wisdom, is to be more prepared for death that is coming to everyone. It sounds quite reasonable, doesn’t it?

However, even on this solution he is uncertain, because he showed that even what wisdom one gains is of no real value because it does not alter one’s destiny. Yet, the wise man sees that death is coming and lives accordingly, while the fool walks in darkness and is caught unprepared. But even this grand thing called wisdom has its limits

We can have despairing thoughts as I try to pursue happiness and not find fulfillment (Ecclesiastes 2:15-23) Pursuing happiness through wisdom is pointless the Preacher says in (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16). Pursuing happiness through work is pointless (Ecclesiastes 2:17-23) Our Preacher realized and we can realize, that if we make the pursuit of wisdom and work as our meaning in life; in the end, we have nothing.

In Luke 12, Jesus is in full agreement with Ecclesiastes, when he shares a parable call the “Rich Fool”. The parable is told in response to a man who comes and asks Jesus to tell the man’s brother to share the family inheritance. The parable that follows, briefly tells of a rich man who gathered much in this life. He ran out of storage, so he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones.

The man told himself, “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Sound’s like Preacher doesn’t it? In reply God says, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” You cannot take it with you. Empty handed we come into the world and empty handed we leave.

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The Preacher knew he had to give his kingship up when he died, to his son. He even doubted the wisdom of passing on his legacy to his son. Preacher, it appears, was very despairing toward life and its pursuits.

He realized that trying to make himself happy won't accomplish anything when it is driven by my own will. Is there any answer to the futility? Maybe we can only find happiness in our relationship with God (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26) It's what Jesus concluded in his parable. We read in Luke, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God." (v.21) Preacher concludes from all this, a seemingly better path.

"There is nothing better for man than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from Him? For to the man who is pleasing in His sight, He gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:24–26) Not the conclusion we'd might expect.

Some scholars make the following distinction about enjoyment of life and one's judgment. First, Preacher stated that God's disposition of wealth and the enjoyment of one's labors and its fruits are based on whether a man is pleasing to God or is a sinner. We know this to be not true, (see Job's story). Second, Preacher wrote that this judgment, interestingly enough, would take place in this life (not in a life after death) and would involve temporal not eternal rewards.

In other words, one will be judged in this world, about the way one lives today, and not just for eternity. We do make an impact in this life. Gordon Keddie sums it up well, when he writes, "Death is the wall that under-the-sun secularism cannot climb. Even the remembrance of those who have died perishes with those who knew them personally. Beethoven may be said to live on in his music, but the truth is we know the music, not the man."

Preacher doesn't say "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That's from Kurt Vonnegut's book *Cat's Cradle*. Preacher is not a fatalist. He believes that there is more to life after death. Instead, Preacher emphasized the importance of building a relationship with God. Preacher even says that whatever a sinner or saint accumulates, God will give to his children. Happiness can only be derived by a loving relationship with a loving Heavenly Father.

Jesus said it another way: *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you."* (Matthew 6:33) A writer said these prophetic words in *The Wall Street Journal* describing money as "an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness." These words could have come from our Preacher.

The American Constitution states that its people are guaranteed the right to pursue happiness. Yet as wonderful as that sound politically, it is disastrous in reality, for happiness will never be found by those who pursue it. Happiness is an elusive butterfly—the more you chase it, the quicker it flies away. The only way to find real life is to let it go, die to self, and seek first the kingdom of God, whereby all you ever longed for will be added unto you.

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G. D. Watson, a Wesleyan evangelist and preacher, during the American civil war era, wrote some powerful words in his book *Living Words*. The following sums up our conclusion well.

If God has called you to be really like Jesus, He will draw you into a life of crucifixion and humility, and put upon you such demands of obedience, that you will not be able to follow other people, or measure yourself by other Christians, and in many ways, He will seem to let other good people do things which He will not let you do.

Other Christians and ministers who seem very religious and useful, may push themselves, pull wires, and work schemes to carry out their plans, but you cannot do it; and if you attempt it, you will meet with such failure and rebuke from the Lord as to make you sorely penitent. Others may boast of themselves, of their work, of their success, of their writings, but the Holy Spirit will not allow you to do any such thing, and if you begin it, He will lead you into some deep mortification that will make you despise yourself and all your good works.

Others may be allowed to succeed in making money, or may have a legacy left to them, but it is likely God will keep you poor, because He wants you to have something far better than gold, namely, a helpless dependence on Him, that He may have the privilege of supplying your needs day by day out of an unseen treasury.

The Lord may let others be honored and put forward, and keep you hidden in obscurity, because He wants you to produce some choice, fragrant fruit for His coming glory, which can only be produced in the shade. He may let others be great, but keep you small. He may let others do a work for Him and get the credit for it, but He will make you work and toil on without knowing how much you are doing; and then to make your work still more precious, He may let others get the credit for the work which you have done, and thus make your reward ten times greater when Jesus comes.

The Holy Spirit will put a strict watch over you, with a jealous love, and will rebuke you for little words and feelings, or for wasting your time, which other Christians never seem distressed over. So, make up your mind that God is an infinite Sovereign, and has a right to do as He pleases with His own. He may not explain to you a thousand things which puzzle your reason in His dealings with you, but if you absolutely sell yourself to be His love slave, He will wrap you up in a jealous love, and bestow upon you many blessings which come only to those who are in the inner circle.

Settle it forever, then, that you are to deal directly with the Holy Spirit, and that He is to have the privilege of tying your tongue, or chaining your hand, or closing your eyes, in ways that He does not seem to use with others. Now when you are so possessed with the loving God that you are, in your secret heart, pleased and delighted over this peculiar, personal, private, jealous guardianship and management of the Holy Spirit over your life, you will have found the vestibule of Heaven.