

Ecclesiastes – What is the Chief Good? Christ-likeness

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## Introduction

The Chief Good in life is living with the “Kingdom Mentality.” That is to say, step outside the worldly view of our existence and attempt to view life from God’s eternal perspective. To be more pointed, the chief good can be defined as living as near to Christ-like as possible. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 KJV)

“I have learned, perhaps late in life, that living a successful and happy life is not about material or fleshly things. These things tend to draw me away from God and His Will. It takes an incredibly well-grounded faith to be materially prosperous in this world and maintain your walk with God. The Apostle Paul’s words ring in my ears, ‘Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.’ (Philippians 4:11, KJV)” (Turner 6-7)

Being content, yes that is part of it, and that is hard enough. But to be Christ-like one must also be sanctified – set apart – Holy. “But know that the LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the LORD will hear when I call unto him.” (Psalm 4:3 KJV) “By sanctification is ordinarily meant that hallowing of the Christian believer by which he is freed from sin and enabled to realize the will of God in his life. This is not, however, the first or common meaning in the Scriptures. To sanctify means commonly to make holy, that is, to separate from the world and consecrate to God.” (Orr, e-sword® ISBE dictionary entry for sanctification) However, to be sanctified one must first be “justified” through Biblical Salvation. That is, to take into one’s heart the gift of imputed righteousness resulting from the Gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of

Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Once we have accepted the gift of salvation we are instantly justified. We instantly inherit the promised everlasting life in heaven at the feet of God the Father. Next, while still in this mortal shell, we set onto the path of sanctification, to live a pure, holy, and Christ-like life. This path is the Chief Good of life, the pursuit of being in Christ's likeness continuously. Avoiding the temptations and human inclinations of the world and staying on the path.

### **Expanding on the View of the “Chief Good” in Ecclesiastes.**

The book of Ecclesiastes doesn't directly discuss Heaven or the benefits and blessing to be attained and anticipated. Ecclesiastes only hints at the Kingdom Mentality when the book discusses the secret to living well and in God's plan for us.

What if there is another view of the “chief good” we can take in looking at Ecclesiastes? After going over the book several times, it occurred to me that we can also look at this book from the perspective of, “Why were we created?” This question also gets at the heart of the message of the preacher (a.k.a. Solomon). “... Fear God and keep His commandments...” (Ecclesiastes 12:13 KJV) Solomon says all else is “Vapor” or “Smoke.” I take this to mean that everything else is a cover-up to what is real and what is true. In this world if we strive to “be somebody,” to “make a mark,” or just to get fulfillment from personal pleasure, power, fame, or any other worldly endeavor, then we have misunderstood the purpose in our creation. By misunderstanding this purpose we will never be fulfilled or satisfied. Solomon kept characterizing man's existence as futility, vapor, smoke, and “spitting into the wind.” (Ecclesiastes MSG) What does he mean in the use of these terms? Let's look at them. Futility is defined as: “1. Triflingness; unimportance; want of weight or effect; as, to expose the futility of arguments. 2. The quality of producing no valuable effect, or of coming to nothing; as the futility of measures or schemes.” (Webster, e-sword® dictionary entry for futility) Vapor or Smoke can be characterized by their nature to cover up what

is real, to be made to believe something is there, or not there, when it isn't or is. We often pretend, even to ourselves, that our life is good and meaningful when inside we feel empty. And then "spitting into the wind" (MSG) or "Vexation of Spirit" (KJV) is defined in Barnes as "Feeding on the Wind" or "to follow or striving for the wind." (Barnes e-sword® commentary, Ecclesiastes 1:14) This is to say to do something seeking relief or satisfaction only to find an unexpected and distasteful result. As is often the case after spitting into the wind, one finds a face full of sputum after trying to get rid of something distasteful.

These terms and ideas are all characterizations of our lives when we live the "I" or "me" generation. We see Solomon referring to this by saying, "There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt." (Ecclesiastes 5:13 KJV) or, "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 8:14 KJV) We often just don't get it, and as a result can never be completely fulfilled. This is what Solomon is saying. That he tried, and excelled at, all the worldly definitions of success, happiness, and power. And in the end it left him feeling empty because even he, Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, got all caught up in a worldly existence instead of a "kingdom existence." Power, wealth, fame, great creations, even great wisdom and good works ultimately leads to a feeling of emptiness and worthlessness unless they are done according to God's purpose and will for us. If all we do is done with a Godly purpose, then at the end when we die and all that is left is dust, we have the eternal kingdom to look forward to. God doesn't expect a result in these efforts, He only expects obedience and effort. Then all the deeds and works done according to God's Will shall count for something. "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works." (James 2:18 KJV) Also, "For the Son of man shall come in

the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.” (Matthew 16:27 KJV) “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.” (Revelation 20:12 KJV) Notice it says “works” not “results!”

Solomon also tells us to enjoy life, be balanced, and to enjoy our work. “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” (Ecclesiastes 2:24 KJV) Likewise Solomon says, “On a good day, enjoy yourself; On a bad day, examine your conscience. God arranges for both kinds of days so that we won't take anything for granted.” (Ecclesiastes 7:14 MSG) Solomon also says the ultimate in living life to the expectation of God is to “Fear God and keep His commandments.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13 MSG) So, as we live, as we work according to God's Will, we should enjoy our experiences. “Seize life! Eat bread with gusto, Drink wine with a robust heart. Oh yes--God takes pleasure in your pleasure!” (Ecclesiastes 9:7 MSG) Enjoy our pleasures and works in the context of a reverent fear of God and live according to His expectations. Live as Christ lived. Live as a servant. Live with steadfast adherence to God's Laws. Because we were created to worship Him and honor Him directly and through the way we live our life.

## **What is the Chief Good – Interviews and Analysis**

### ***Analysis of Interview with Mr. Jeff Livesay***

My first interview was with a co-worker named Jeff Livesay. He has been a successful entrepreneur who has started and sold several high-tech companies as well as helped startups and venture companies in their formative stages. He is a member and elder of a Methodist church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

Mr. Livesay said the chief good is to “do good to others and in general always do good.” He continued by saying we should “love God and be with God, to be in his presence and aware of his presence. We should be constantly cognizant of Him and be thanking Him, having a relationship with Him, pray to Him, etc. It’s not practical for us to always be praying, but to live in his light, in his presence.” He thought for a moment and then said, “In an act of goodness to us, He sent His son to us as a person we could relate to, in human form. So, rather than hundreds of Levitical Laws he boiled it down to two: love and obedience, or, love God, and love your neighbors.”

In the final analysis Mr. Livesay boiled the chief good down into Jesus’ “greatest commandment” to a scribe in the book of Mark. “And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, ‘Which is the first commandment of all?’ And Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.’ (Mark 12:28-31 KJV) And to the Pharisees in the book of Matthew, “But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, ‘Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said unto him, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:34-40 KJV) Mr. Livesay’s answer reflects an understanding of what it takes to live a truly successful life. For if he keeps these commandments foremost in his mind day-to-day as he goes through his life, he will live in God’s Will and draw ever nearer to the goal of Christ-likeness.

### ***Analysis of Interview with Pastor James Combs***

My second interview was with my pastor, James E. Combs. Pastor Combs is the senior pastor at four churches in and around North Oakland County, Michigan, with a total congregation of approximately 8,000 to 10, 000 people. He has been in the ministry for approximately 30 years starting as a youth pastor in Waterford, Michigan, at the then-named Faith Baptist Church.

Pastor Jim, or just Jim, as he likes to be called, started the interview with me by objecting to the characterizing question assigned to the book of Ecclesiastes, namely, “What is the chief good?” He wondered at the biblical basis for that particular question and if it was a proper characterization of Ecclesiastes. I suggested that we just take the question as a given and for him to focus on the question and what he believed the central point was for Ecclesiastes. To this he agreed.

Pastor Jim started by saying our existence is to be centered on God. He said, “It’s [Life is] all about God. We were created for God. We are to worship Him, honor Him, live for Him,... it’s all Him. Nothing makes sense without Him.” He continued by saying that everything in life will be a disappointment without God. Pastor Jim said, “Nothing makes sense without Him. Everything will be a disappointment.” He said, “Many, many people approach me and say, ‘The church has disappointed me. My family has disappointed me. My friends have disappointed me. You, Pastor, have disappointed me.’” He then switched focus onto Ecclesiastes and said, “Solomon had 700 wives and was disappointed. [Solomon] said, ‘I’ll get famous,’ and was disappointed, ‘I’ll get wealth beyond measures,’ and was disappointed, [Solomon] was King of Israel and was disappointed. Solomon found that all things, feelings, family, and even godly stuff like building the Temple was disappointing because they were done for worldly reasons. That is why Solomon said, ‘It is all vanity.’ [It’s not] It’s all about God.” And that is where he left it.

Pastor Jim, even while objecting to the question, hit the nail on the head. In his answer he describes most of what Solomon said in chapter two of Ecclesiastes regarding the folly of



Solomon's own life. If our motivation for anything is other than a focus on God, and living for His purpose, then we will be left disappointed and feeling empty. And I dare to say, we will be left asking ourselves, "Is this all that there is? Is this why I was created? Is this the best I can do? Is this the chief good?" "Don't worryingly second-guess your orders or try to back out when the task is unpleasant. You're serving his pleasure, not yours." (Ecclesiastes 8:3 MSG) To be sure, as Paul said to Timothy, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." (1 Timothy 6:7 KJV) Living a life devoid of God has disastrous results. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26 KJV)

### ***Analysis of Interview with Mr. Lindsey Springer***

Mr. Lindsey Springer is a close friend that lives near Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is the founder and principle resource associated with an organization called Bondage Breakers Ministries. This ministry is dedicated to the support of people being oppressed by certain agencies within the U. S. Government. Mr. Springer, in my humble opinion, is extraordinarily intelligent. He has presented argument to the Supreme Court of the United States. He also happens to be one of the most God-centered people I know. His response to the question, "What is the chief good?" is below.

Mr. Springer said, "God! God is the chief good." He described that he spent much of a year searching the scriptures for guidance on how he should pursue his life, his marriage, and his work. He claims that God set him on his mission over 14 years ago and he has single-mindedly pursued that mission. He often, by his own admission, argues with God, and why God allows certain things to happen (refer to Ecclesiastes 8:3, ('Don't second guess your orders') and Ecclesiastes 8:14, ('Bad things happen to good people,') previously quoted) but ultimately in prayer he is given revelation and always bows to God's Will. Lindsey claims that he is commanded to love those in powerful positions who are bent on destroying the lives of good people while breaking the very laws they

have sworn to uphold. He often quotes the principle in the book of Matthew, “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” (Matthew 7:1-2 KJV) Lindsey reads these verses to mean that he may not judge any person unless they first judge him on a matter. By personal observation I believe Lindsey also pursues truth and righteousness by living according to this model, “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” (Acts 10:34-35 KJV) In the final analysis, Mr. Springer pursues a life of Christ-likeness in both what he says and in what he does by having a total focus on God.

After reading this report on Mr. Springer, Mr. Springer wished me to add that he in no way wishes to be portrayed as sinless or perfect and reminds me that "no man goes without sin" and "let he who goes without sin, cast the first stone." That all too often those who are reading about someone else are left with only the limited view of the writer and not the complete view which God has. He also stated that if something were to be written about a man's life, from beginning to end, those things which preceded that man's pursuit of the Will of God would probably explain motive for that pursuit in more detail. And finally, he said it is man's ability to reach God through all of man's imperfections which he believes pleases God the most.

### **Spreading the “Chief Good” to the un-Scriptural Person**

In an attempt to spread the concept of the “chief good” to the un-Scriptural person, the assumption I start with is that an argument of “living life for God” would be unpersuasive to the unscriptural person. After all, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14 KJV) A discussion starting on the topic of the purpose of life, or how to live life

with a good or best purpose, would be more palatable to the un-Scriptural person. Then as the discussion proceeds, one can interject or draw parallels to a focus on living a Godly, Christ-like life.

Every decent person wants to believe they are good or that they live a good life, or would *like to* live a good life. Fewer people would immediately identify with the concept that living life with a purpose should be a focus for them. Purpose is too far from the “me-centered” perspective of people these days. So, having laid the groundwork above, I would start with the following premise. Let’s assume that after we die we still have a consciousness that lasts forever and we have the opportunity to be happy, satisfied, and joyous forever. In addition, this everlasting joy has nothing to do with our actions during that period. I believe everyone would agree they would want that experience. Next, I would present the caveat that, okay, this everlasting happiness, etc., depends upon how we live our life before we die. The expected response, I would assume, would be, “Then how do I need to live my life? Or, give me an example of how to live this life.” To which I would respond, “I have a perfect example. There is a guy whose life is a perfect picture of how to live the life that would lead to this eternal happiness.” I would then describe the attributes of Christ’s life. How he lifts up the poor and downtrodden, lives to follow a good and moral life, found a way to actually enjoy serving others, removed all destructive influence from his life, etc. Next, if all that seemed reasonable, I would explain that there is help available in how to live this required life, that this un-scriptural person need not be alone in the struggle to live this life. Then I would describe the groups of people within my church that are there trying to do the same thing, live this special life. And at this point, assuming all is going well, I would describe that there is even further help in living this life – a psychological or internal help that guides you from the inside out. I would then describe in this way: “Remember that guy who was that picture of the perfect life. Well, if you admit you need help and accept him as your personal mentor (let’s say Savior) then you will get that

internal help (the Holy Spirit).” “Yet I did spot one ray of light in this murk: God made men and women true and upright; we're the ones who've made a mess of things.” (Ecclesiastes 7:29 MSG)

With God and His iron clad promise of an everlasting life, the motivations to live a “good life” goes beyond the rewards one can get in the here and now. And those rewards are beyond our comprehension. An eternal “God perspective” gives us motivation beyond the “I” and “me” perspective. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21 KJV)

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