

I Was There When It Happened

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] As you can... This is a grapevine, and this is a fig tree, and this is me.

I am... People keep asking me how I like retirement, and I don't especially, but the great ideal of retirement in the Old Testament is that you sit under your fig tree by your grapevine, presumably drinking the wine and eating the figs, and life is complete.

You know, that's the best you can expect of life, and there it is. So this is a picture of what life is about, at least in one verse in the Old Testament, more than that.

But the difficulty is that that just isn't enough, and it's hard to know what you do with that.

But there is this problem. It's actually spoken of in Ecclesiastes, where he says he's made everything beautiful in its time.

[1 : 34] He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot find what God has done from the beginning to the end. So that despite this idyllic picture, you get caught, because there's got to be something more.

And human beings can't escape from the reality that having achieved this, there is still a basic human discontent that you can't deal with.

And you can join the golf club if you want, and do one or two things like that. But basically, there's this inescapable reality, which is described in Ecclesiastes as, he has set eternity in their hearts.

There has got to be something more. And of course, that's a universal experience of the whole of mankind the world over, that they're caught in this trap.

If you're a Roman Catholic, you know that the Catholics have made a great deal of the necessity of obedience through the life of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and the ultimate authority of the Holy Father.

[3 : 03] You can tell I'm a Protestant the way I say it. But I really am very respectful of that position, because while the Catholics are under vows of obedience from which they would like some freedom, the Protestants are under freedom and badly need some obedience.

So you just see that different ways that people try and deal with it. The Muslim world is, they've created a kind of different situation in which the answer is that the rule of man in politics and the rule of God are the same thing.

And if you're under one, you're under the other. And they try and create a situation for humankind on the basis of that. The Protestants have been big on justification by faith.

And that justification by faith says that you have a relationship to God in Christ, and that's nobody else's business but yours.

And of course, that's given rise to, I think, the whole modern secular world, where if you ask somebody about their relationship to God, they will say it's none of your business, because it's secret, and what it is is only known to them.

[4 : 37] And that carries on. Well, the reason I'm telling you this is because somebody said to me this week, and it sort of impressed me, the parent of a student who graduated from university and is backpacking his way through Southeast Asia.

And apparently, part of this is the search for some guru. The search for some, it's this restlessness, it's this eternity in the heart of a recent graduate who looks at his material and technological world and says, there's got to be something more.

Where is it? And so with a backpack and time and opportunity, they wander through the various countries of Southeast Asia looking for the ancient spiritual wisdom of the East to provide an answer.

One very wise man said that religion in North America in this century is going to be marked predominantly by the infiltration of the religions of the East.

That's had a profound influence on the whole spiritual inheritance of the West. So it's not surprising, perhaps, that students from our university, and part of this is because there is prevailing in our world a strong rejection of the institutional church.

[6 : 29] And I think it's probably a legitimate rejection because the church has compromised itself in so many ways in order to win a following in our sophisticated culture.

If you want me to come to church, the church has got to be like this. And so the church tries to be like this and then loses the very wealth of its inheritance.

And, you know, Jim Packer mentioned the other day in connection with that article in Maclean's magazine where 80% of Canadians believe in God.

And he pointed out that only in a democracy would they think that means anything. It's a very kind of strange situation.

And part of the dissatisfaction comes because we live in a world where there may be nothing wrong with homosexuality, but the idea that sexuality has no universal morality underlying it seems not true to most people.

[7 : 51] I don't think they can come to terms with it. But the private and personal relationship between two people suggests that there is something more to sexuality than the uninhibited exploitation of it.

There may even in our society be reasons to allow abortion. But nobody would say that it wouldn't be a better world where it was never necessary.

And we may need to break the hierarchy of men over women. But I would like to suggest that's not to be done by establishing the hierarchy of women over men.

It's basic to our humanity. There are big questions. A child of 15 may be capable of being sexually active.

But most people of 35 are not that grateful that they took advantage of that. It doesn't seem to have a big payoff.

[9 : 10] The elimination of racism by legislation is not... I don't think people don't feel it's the end of the problem. It's only lengthening the fuse before the situation eventually blows up, you know, as it has in Yugoslavia.

It's a very profound human problem. And what is characteristic of our lives is that we are forced to live with short-term answers to long-term problems.

And what we're long for is to find some long-term answers to our short-term problems.

And that's what I think it's meant when it says that he has set eternity in our hearts.

Everybody hates labor unions. I'm going to go on from there, so don't... But everybody knows that there's no other way of relating across the gap that separates teachers and school boards, employees and management.

[10 : 23] Government knows that they are dependent on most citizens having more money than they can earn. And how do you do that? Well, it's...

That's the kind of thing that I think gives us the sense that there's got to be something more.

Now look at the passage that you have in your hands. And what you have there... And I think it's... I mean, it's...

It's this reality. Here is human being. And that he's looking to the sun coming over the mountain, if you want.

And he's aware of two things. One of them is that he's locked in time in what, if he looks at it from any distance, is a very short span of time.

[11 : 38] And the other is that he's aware of something vastly greater than his existence. And what you have in this story that Jim read to us from Proverbs is the awareness that there is something more.

Try and, you know, put yourself as the person who is speaking this and see if there isn't some sense in which you can imagine yourself in this situation.

That presumably many creatures are able to lock themselves into the moment of time that belongs to their life. But human beings can't do it.

They look at the night sky. They look at the sunset. They look at the mountains. They look at nature. They look at history. They look at these things. And all of a sudden, their horizons are vastly greater.

And they're aware of a whole lot more than they can be a part of. And just put yourself in the place of saying, God created me when his purpose first unfolded before the oldest of his works.

[12 : 55] From the beginning, before the earth came into being, the deep was not when I was born. There were no springs gushing with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I came to birth, before he made the earth, the countryside, or the first grains of the world's dust.

And I'm reading in the Jerusalem Bible and you're reading the NIV, so you have to make that translation as we go on. When he fixed the heavens firm, I was there.

When he drew a ring on the surface of the deep, when he thickened the clouds above, when he fixed the springs of the deep, when he assigned the sea its boundaries, and the water will not invade the shore, when he laid down the foundations of the earth, I was by his side, a master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world, delighting to be with the sons of men and women.

The strange kind of reality of a human being, before time and before material and before history, a kind of projection of a relationship to God which is outside of all of that, but which exists in our hearts, that eternity in our hearts, that awareness, the awareness that there is some profound meaning to our life.

[14 : 45] Now, I just give you that because I want you to have that as one portrait of our humanity, of that kind of relationship to God.

Then I want you to listen while I read to you from the book of Job. And this is when Eliphaz the Temanite pours scorn on the pretensions of our humanity, pours scorn on the idea that we have any significance, pours scorn on the meaning of individual human existence.

And he says to Job, with scorn and cynicism, Job, are you the first man that was ever born? Is that who you think you are?

Were you brought forth before the hills? Do you listen in on God's counsels? Do you limit wisdom to yourself? What do you know that we do not know?

What insight do you have that we do not have? The gray-haired and the aged are on our side. Men even older than your fathers, are God's consolations not enough for you?

[16 : 06] Words spoken gently to you? Why has your heart carried you away? And why do your eyes flash with anger so that you vent your rage against God and pour out such words from your mouth?

What is man that he could be pure or one born of a woman that he could be righteous? You know, one of the great problems of our humanity. If God places no trust in his holy ones, if even the heavens are not pure in his eyes, how much less man who is vile and corrupt who drinks evil like water.

Well, you see that picture of the meanness of man and the meanness and hopelessness of our aspirations on the one hand, and then this powerful picture of man being present to God in eternity, before time, before the mountains, before the seas, and you get these two pictures, one time-locked man and one man in eternity.

Well, now, I tell you all that because what seems to be the issue at stake here is that somehow when our kids are backpacking in the Southeast Pacific, when the whole sort of renunciation of the rational and the material and the intellectual is going on and people are wide open and totally susceptible to any spiritual breeze that seems to be blowing, what is taking place?

And it seems to be that our longing for God is something by which we want to break out of time.

[18 : 24] So that if you look at that passage from Proverbs, it talks about a consciousness of being present before his deeds of old, before the world began, before the mountains were settled and before the earth and the fields were made, before any of the dust of the world.

There were no oceans, no springs. The heavens were not in place and the horizons were not marked out. The clouds were not established.

The fountains of the deep were not there. The sea had no boundaries. Then we were present with God.

It's strange, isn't it? But I think it is a description for the whole of humankind in all the exercise of all the religions of the world.

I think there is a longing and a desire to come to that place, to be present with God. You know, and that whether you're a Protestant or whether you're a Catholic or whether you're a Muslim or whether you're a Hindu or a Buddhist or whatever you are, there's that longing to be there, to find that place.

[19 : 44] And of course, the difficulty is that when you find it, then something breaks down and you apply for a patent and say nobody else can get there unless they come your way.

But I think you can at least say that for the whole of humankind, there is that longing. Well, it's almost quarter to one and I've got us into very deep water and I'm not sure if we'll get out in the next three minutes, but I'm going to work hard at it because the thing that, the reason I wanted to paint that picture for you, the reason I wanted you to look at that is because there is this, what this says, what this passage says, the passage is that is that wisdom was something that God brought into being, gave birth to.

That's what he's talking about because this is a kind of picture of of wisdom. He says, God gave birth to this before he gave birth to the material world and that God's idea about man and God's purpose for man were established before the material world so that it's not the material world that leads us to understanding ultimately.

It's getting behind and before the material world that brings us into the presence of God and that's why he says that wisdom was there before the world began, before anything happened.

Wisdom was there and you've got to seek that place of wisdom and that wisdom was there as and he says it was it's personified as a person you know, which is unique to the Bible.

[22 : 06] The Bible will not let you separate the creation from the creator. It will not allow you to have wisdom without the fear of the Lord. It won't allow you to know God apart from a relationship to God.

And that's what wisdom says. But then it says other things. It says before time began was there was the glory of God hidden so that before time and creation there is the glory of God.

Before time and creation there is the wisdom of God. And then you know what it says? Before time and creation Christ was crucified.

He belongs to that. Though it happened in a point in time it also belongs to that. And before time and creation the glory of God which is hidden and veiled by creation existed.

And you have to discover the breakthrough of the glory of God by looking at the spiritual reality behind creation. The spiritual reality which has to do with a relationship to God.

[23 : 24] And you know that very passage that we read ends with ends with the line that he delighted to be with the children of men.

He delighted to be with with us in our humanity. humanity. And of course he came among us to reveal the reality of his presence and his purpose and make it available to us through the eternal wisdom through the glory which lies behind the whole of creation through the point in history in which Christ who was crucified before the foundations of the world.

That that's what you meet there. And that's where you meet God. And that's the fulfillment of the longing of the human heart to come to that place.

So that when man looks and looks and looks for the presence and reality and purpose of God he finds it in that which is before time and before history and before the material world.

It's there. So that you are in one sense a two-dimensional creature. You're locked into time and space. Your feet are in the mud. But by faith and trust in God you are a creature that belongs to eternity.

[25 : 00] He has set eternity in our hearts. And that's where we find our identity. And you see the whole picture of man as being expendable.

Man as being a kind of warped part of creation that's gone bad and lives and lusts and dies is not enough. Because humanity has that longing to know God and God has that longing to be known in which he has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

Through the Old Testament the great goal was and this is the heart of the book of Job. He says the fear of the Lord that is wisdom.

That in that relationship to God is to be our understanding. God and this is the wisdom. And then he says of course that that understanding that wisdom Christ is made to us wisdom.

That wisdom is personified in history and in the person of Jesus Christ. And nobody comes to God the Father but by me.

[26 : 23] seeking. And that that's at the heart of what we're seeking. The heart of what we're longing for. Well, let me pray for us.

our God as each of us are locked in the particular dimensions of our own personal life in the web of our own personal relationships in the joys and sorrows the temptations and the despair sometimes of our own existence.

We thank you that your purpose is that you have set eternity in our hearts that we can't understand ourselves and we can't understand you locked as we are into your creation and into time but that your glory and your wisdom transcend time and that we enter into relationship to you as we come to know and acknowledge he who was slain before the foundations of the world even Jesus Christ our Lord and that when Paul held on to the wisdom of God he said I am resolved to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified God because in him alone do we see your purpose which is greater than death in him alone do we see the claim that you have on our lives in him alone can we understand why we search the world over for that which we know to be there but which we can't grasp until it grasps us we can't find you until you have found us and you seek us in the person of our

Lord Jesus Christ grant us to submit to that in faith and obedience we ask in Jesus name
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