

## **"It Is Well With My Soul, Despite Uncertainty"**

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 9: 7 - 12, Luke 12: 22 - 31

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While visiting in Toronto in 2012, Jessica Ghawi stopped at the Eaton Centre to have a hamburger in the food court. Three minutes after she left a gunman fired shots in that foodcourt, killing one and injuring seven. Jessica wrote of the experience on her blog a few days later: "I was reminded that we don't know when or where our time on Earth will end. When or where we will breathe our last breath. I wish I could shake this odd feeling from my chest . . . The feeling that may have potentially saved my life." Her words echo the sentiment of our reading from Ecclesiastes today, don't they? Tragically, Jessica was killed by a gunman in a movie theatre in Denver one month later.

News such as this is unsettling, to be sure. Statistics tell us that violent crime in Canada has been slowly but steadily declining for a few decades, and that we are in fact safer than we used to be. Yet news of events like these can make us feel more insecure, despite what the statistics tell us. It can foster feelings of uncertainty. When some things in our life are unknown – like what will happen to your young daughter the first day she walks to school on her own, or how the company will respond to your job application, or what will the stock markets do, or questions concerning your health – not knowing for certain frequently leads to anxiousness and worry. It's natural to feel these things.

Tennis star Serena Williams lives with uncertainty regarding when an attack of debilitating back spasms will assault her. When they pounce, serves and overhand shots are very painful. A week ago Williams made it to the finals of the Rogers Cup competition in Toronto. But in the midst of the match these muscle spasms came on and she had to withdraw from the tournament. Bianca Andreescu was named the victor, becoming the first Canadian woman to win the tournament in 50 years. As Ecclesiastes acknowledges, "the race is not always to the swiftest or the battle to the strongest."

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes spent time reflecting on how life can be so uncertain. By his own account, he had been exceedingly successful: "I became great" he wrote, "and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem" (2:9). Initially, he assumed his success came from his ability to control his own destiny. He believed there was certain predictability -- even dependability -- to the ways of the world which, if understood and used, would bring anyone "profit". A summary of his thinking is found in chapter 10, verse 2: "It is natural for the wise person to do what is right!" Such confidence that everything can be controlled.

But this self - satisfaction crumbled when the world turned out to be far less certain than he first thought. The author summed up his thoughts on the uncertainty of life in this way: "I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a trap, so mortals are snared at the time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them" (9:11-12).

The reason for this, according to this author, is that time and chance can happen to us all (vs. 11). By chance Jessica happened to be in that foodcourt in Toronto that day, and that movie theatre in Denver. Chance. By chance in 2013 a weather system got stalled over Alberta in just the right place to dump an incredible amount of water into the Bow River watershed. By chance, Serena Williams got an attack of back spasms at the precise wrong time. Historically, "chance" was a word despised by Presbyterians. We tended towards a view of God called "Determinism", which means there is no chance. In the belief of determinism, everything and every event is scheduled and programmed by our sovereign God. Over the past 100 years, though, we have backed away from this view of God. We no longer promote a view of God that is so cold, calculating and callous that God would determine—let alone desire—shootings and floods. Rather, human nature as it is—and what we call sin—can cause violence to break out. Weather as it is, can be unforgiving in the power and damage it releases. Back spasms happen.

So if the author of Ecclesiastes is right—that time and chance happen to us all, and that we cannot anticipate the time of disaster—then what good is God? Some think God should make everything fine, especially for Christians. But we know this is not the case, since the cruel net can engulf believer and non-believer alike. Instead, the power of God and the gift of faith is that in the time of trouble we have one greater than us to turn to... and we have a perspective to hold us together as we endure it. In writing about the secret of being at peace in an uncertain world, the Christian theologian Lewis Smedes put it this way: "it is the discovery that we can be content with our discontent". Uncertainty is a part of any journey, he wrote, and we are born to travel. Acknowledgment that the time of calamity can befall us at any time, acceptance of the fact that we can't control everything, and hope under God that things will be well, these are the spiritual resources that can sustain us in an uncertain world.

"Uncertainty is part of our journey." Earnest Gordon was a fish caught in a cruel net when he became a prisoner of war in 1942, and sent to the River Kwai camp to build the infamous Burma railroad. The camp attitude was "every man for himself" as prisoners were willing to pit themselves against each other in the struggle to survive. Then three things happened. It was discovered that one prisoner (a Christian) chose to starve himself to death in order to ensure a sick friend got enough food. Another prisoner (a Christian) confessed to stealing a missing shovel when the guards threatened to kill all

members of a work crew unless the culprit came forward. The missing shovel was later discovered, misplaced not stolen. The third event: Earnest Gordon was dying of appendicitis and relegated by British doctors to one end of the morgue to make things simpler when the inevitable happened. But two friends came to his aid: caring for him, feeding him, bathing him, and helping him regain strength. The selfless, hopeful acts of four Christians reawakened the Christian faith and hopefulness of many prisoners. A library was created out of previously coveted and hidden books. A theatre company was formed as well as an orchestra (with instruments provided by the Red Cross). More importantly, a Sunday worship service was instituted as well as Bible study classes. Why did this happen in the most horrifying setting imaginable? These men grew to appreciate that "uncertainty is part of the journey" of life, that God was a companion on that journey, that in the midst of the uncertainty there could be hope, and that hope could foster acts of grace...with two of those acts of grace resulting in the death of the giver. These events resulted in a great spiritual awakening for Earnest Gordon. After the war he became a Presbyterian minister, and eventually the chaplain of Princeton University.

Christ raised this view to even greater heights, pointedly personalizing it while also declaring it with absolute conviction. "I tell you, do not worry about your life" (Luke 12:22). There is more to life, he said, than worrying about yourselves, "for it is the nations of the world that does these things" (vs 30): that is, those people who did not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. These people did not have a God to depend on, and so they were trapped in their worries. In contrast, we have a dependable God who will care for us. "Consider the ravens" Christ said, "they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than these birds!" (vs 24). This statement is more dramatic than we think, because for the Jews the raven was an unclean creature. If God cared for such as these..... how much more He would care for us!

Then came the kicker in Jesus' sermon. He posed a straightforward rhetorical question, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?" I can just imagine Jesus pausing for a moment for dramatic effect, so his listeners could fill in the obvious answer -- no. Then his reply, "If then you are not able to do so small a thing as this, why do you worry about the rest?" This encouragement of Jesus adds greatly to the observation of Ecclesiastes: "no one can anticipate the time of disaster". So Jesus too says it is futile to dwell on the slim possibility of disaster, or to live in anxiousness of what might happen. The author of Ecclesiastes has other advice, which was the first part of our lesson today: "eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart... Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days given you under the sun" (7-9). In other words, don't let the uncertainties about tomorrow rob you of the enjoyment life can have for all of us today.

Ecclesiastes other reminder that gives us hope is to remember the certainty of God as the one solid point to hold onto in an unpredictable world. He wrote, "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done this, so that all should

stand in awe before Him" (3:14). In a world which is random, unpredictable, uncertain and beyond our control, God can be our rock, our sure foundation, the anchor of our soul. Turning back to that same sermon of Jesus we hear the same thing: that God will care for us in the time of trouble. "If God clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he care for you... do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:28-32). We can know this gift most fully if we turn to God to receive it at the time the cruel net captures us.

In the mid-19th century Horatio Spafford was a wealthy, successful Chicago lawyer, and a Presbyterian elder. Everything was going his way: for him, his wife Anna and their children... until 1870 when their 4 year old son died of scarlet fever. The following year he invested his wealth heavily in the booming real estate market, and then lost most of it six months later in the great Chicago fire of 1871. If that were not enough, in 1873 the Spafford's decided to vacation in England, and Horatio sent his family on ahead by ship—he was held back by business. On November 22nd, his family's ship—the Ville du Havre—was struck by another ship and sank. All Horatio's children drowned. Upon reaching safety Anna sent her husband a telegraph saying "Saved alone. What shall I do?" Horatio left immediately for England, taking the long, sad journey alone. Part way through the journey the ship captain sought Spafford out, to tell him that their liner was passing by the site where the Ville du Havre sunk. After watching the sea pass by for a while, Spafford returned to his cabin, and began to write a hymn..... one of Christianity's most favourite hymns, which reflected the assurance of God's help, the strength of God's support, the conviction that even in the most tragic of times help can be found in God. The hymn was Horatio Spafford's profession of faith, and his testimony to how he was sustained by God. Let us sing his hymn, "It is Well with My Soul", and may it be our profession of faith in the face of the uncertainties of life.