

THE HARD TIMES

“The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings are like firmly embedded nails - given by one Shepherd.”

— ECCLESIASTES 12:11

In Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, verses 1 to 8, Solomon lists 14 sets of contrasting statements, some of which are fairly obvious: there's a time to be born and a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh, but also some of a more difficult nature; a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to love and a time to hate.

There are two legitimate ways Solomon could have arrived at these summations, both expressing an overall depressing and cynical outlook. One is from a perspective that things just happen in some meaningless process over which we have no control. The other is by looking at them as an explanation or interpretation of life. He doesn't resign himself to the fact there is a series of negative and positive events in life, but affirms it.

We like to embrace the positive, but things go wrong in people's lives - sometimes terribly wrong. They can create within themselves an expectancy which God has not given them, and may even blame Him for not living up to their expectancy. Scripture does not promise a life floating six inches off the ground. Any notion that we can get rid of our sufferings easily and simply if we just believe God will do that for us puts us in danger of forgetting who Jesus Christ is and what His work really is. He is our Saviour who reconciles us to God, imparts spiritual life and brings us into relationship with Him; a relationship that is often stimulated and maintained through trouble, not ease.

Solomon is saying that the richness of life does not mean we live on a level that is above everything else, but we live with this contrast of joy and pain. He concludes, “The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings are like firmly embedded nails - given by one Shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Nails hammered solidly into things hold them securely together, and goads are pointed sticks or rods, a common tool in primitive societies used for prodding and directing oxen.

The hard times are like goads and nails, difficult and sometimes painful, but they realign us with God. That is what Jesus meant when, on the road to Damascus, He said to Paul, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). The negative and positive, the bright times and dark times are the agents of a good Shepherd, who is goading and nailing us into something we would never be if we just lived on the easy plain.

PRAYER: I am grateful for the hard times, Lord, because I know You use them to a good end. May they enrich our relationship and bring me into a deeper knowledge of You.

TO REFLECT UPON: Are difficult times bringing me into an increasing awareness of God’s presence?