

## Testimony of Dr. Hadley Reed

Shared as part of a message on Ecclesiastes, April 27, 2008

The challenge that Solomon faced was, ironically enough, born of his greatest gift, wisdom. Late in life, he truly became the "man who knew too much." His fantastic wisdom enabled him more than any other human being to see the ultimate consequences of any direction that man's mind and imagination might take him. And he came to the same conclusion at the end of each of those pathways: by themselves, none of them were enough to satisfy him, none could give him that sense of true meaning and purpose in life that he deeply desired.

This is a lesson that we in America actually have a difficult time accepting. Truth be told, life is so good here, especially when compared to the rest of the world, that we fall into the unconscious and terribly pernicious misconception that life here is as good as it can get. That we are **supposed** to have a perfect, pain-free, delight-filled, amusement-park-ride through life followed by a similarly comfortable death, though we really glance away from death as more of an embarrassment, as if by dying we've somehow failed or screwed up something here.

Without wanting to admit it to ourselves, we really seem to think that we shouldn't ever have to die at all - that the perfect life is one that we should find here on earth forever. What a horrible notion.

Unlike Solomon, we are still convinced that if only we had the right resources, the proper technology, the sufficient insight into living here on earth, we will experience complete satisfaction and contentment in life right here in the good ol' US of A. Give us enough time and resources and we really WILL create that perfect Kingdom on Earth.

So I think that we as Americans find Solomon in Ecclesiastes to really be just a bit of a stiff, a real grouch, unnecessarily grumpy, in fact, well, really just a bit too "French" for our way of thinking.

Only Americans would try to tell the wisest man in human history that **he** is the one who needs an attitude adjustment.

However, in spite of our best efforts, even we Americans can find ourselves in places we did not want to be, facing things we consider profoundly improper and wholly inconsistent with the script we have for our lives.

And when that happens we stumble upon a terrible truth - that life here is NOT going to be perfect, that instead, we live in a **broken** world and that we, in spite of our best efforts and intentions, are subject to it's brokenness through disease, failure, heart-ache, and even death.

All of the delights and bright shiny things we enjoy in America can suddenly lose their ability to distract us from a reality that the vast majority of the rest of the world's population has rubbed in their faces every day.

Like Solomon, for many of us life has afforded the unexpected and un-welcomed opportunity to explore the previously uncharted waters of the inadequacy of the things we were trusting to get us through this life. Some unexpected catastrophic circumstance breaks into the "regularly scheduled programming" of our personal universe and hijacks our life.

This can make us angry, fearful, disappointed, or even bitter and cynical.

For me, in 2001, as a physician for more than 20 years and a believer of 35 years, it was the completely unexpected diagnosis of an incurable form of bone marrow cancer. I tell you, there is nothing quite like cancer and its attendant treatment to thoroughly convince you that this planet is WAY over-rated as somewhere YOU would want to go to spend your time - that instead, it really **is** an absolutely crummy place to live.

In the years that have followed my diagnosis, through the chemotherapy that damaged the nerves in my hands (taking away my clinical career), the bone marrow transplant (now **that** is never going to catch on as a hobby), and the various other assorted therapeutic delights of the modern medical profession, I have had ample opportunity to demonstrate to myself that the various things that this world might provide are utterly inadequate to sustain me in the face of overwhelming circumstances - not education, intelligence, wealth, position, friends, family, religion or personal accomplishments are sufficient.

And the years and experiences that those years have brought me since those first bleak days have not made me one least bit more adequate. In fact, if anything, I have firmly established beyond any shadow of a doubt, my absolute impeccable and unimpeachable inadequacy.

Like Solomon did in those first eleven verses, I look around me and feel the overwhelming urge to point at all of the edifices I have constructed through the efforts of my own life and say, with some sad laughter, "Vanity, vanity, it really IS all vanity! Nothing lasts, and nothing sustains if built only of my own devices."

For, in spite of his immeasurable wisdom, Solomon found that wisdom alone was not enough for him. Nor was this is about religion. In fact, as we read the life of Solomon, we realize that he had dozens of religions upon which to rely and he apparently examined them all, and as we see in Ecclesiastes, he found all of them to be as inadequate as any other human endeavor he sampled. So what DOES make that difference? What has made all the difference for me?

The one critical thing that has made ALL the difference is the personal, intimate, saving, relationship I have with Jesus Christ and that He has with me.

It has only been through that relationship that I have experienced in ways too many and too extraordinary to describe here today, a remarkable sustainment in the midst of my journey through this broken sin-wrecked world - a sustainment that I have never deserved and never will deserve. That my Jesus has acted in ways I could never have imagined, and still have a difficult time understanding myself, as He has carried me through really rather terrible times, and He still carries me today. Not because I am good, but because HE is so good to me.

[Here I added 2 examples in the 2<sup>nd</sup> service that were not included in the 1<sup>st</sup>.]

Some people in the first worship service told me that they wished I had provided some specific examples of where this had happened in my life. This compels me to point out how *morbid* you all are – like wanting to slow down to more closely examine a traffic accident.

Nevertheless, I will relate to you the following experience: No more than just a few days after my initial diagnosis, I was awakened from a dead, sound sleep around 2 a.m. I sat bolt upright in bed overwhelmed with the most terrifying sensation. I felt as if I were freefalling, hurtling toward the earth at 1,000 miles an hour, and with absolutely nothing between me and that impact point. I distinctly remember in the midst of this terrifying sensation telling myself, “Now is the time to take a personal inventory to see what I possess that I can bring to bear in this terrible crisis.” I immediately came up with the following assessment: I felt naked, cold, wet, and scared.

And that was it. After all my education and training in medicine, theology, history, science, this was all I had with which to face this personal crisis.

Immediately following this extremely bleak inventory, I remember saying to the Lord, “Well, here I am. If you don't catch me, I'm going to hit the earth going a thousand miles an hour.” And finding that I really had nothing further to say, I remember sitting there in bed saying to myself, “Well this is going to be interesting. I really have no idea what's going to happen next . . .”

And for a few seeming minutes, nothing really changed. I continued to feel as if I were screaming toward the earth at 1,000 miles an hour, nothing between me and the impact.

And then, completely unforeseen and wholly unexpected, I suddenly felt myself held firmly and in incomprehensible safety in the hands of God. Though my ears did not hear anything, my soul heard very clearly and firmly God say, “I have you.”

It was absolutely and completely unexpected. Even to this day I cannot begin to describe what that sensation was like other than the description I have already given. I remember being surprised, and then immediately wondering if this was just the result of some complicated mind game I had played upon myself. Given how unbelievably inadequate I had felt moments before, and in fact still felt at that very moment of rescue, I was absolutely disinclined to believe I had anything to do with my current state of safety.

I remember telling myself and the Lord, “I had no idea you could *do* something like that.” Then laughing at myself, going immediately back to sleep. I got up the next morning full of wonder and amazement and uncertainty about the entire affair. Again, partly wondering if it had been merely some trick I had played upon myself.

I had the opportunity to find that out just a few nights later. Exactly as it happened before, I remember waking bolt upright in bed, again completely overwhelmed with the terrifying sensation that I was hurtling straight toward the earth, at a 1,000 miles an hour, with absolutely nothing between me and that brutal impact. Once again, I couldn't avoid taking a personal inventory. And, once again, I came up with the same horribly inadequate list: I simply felt naked, cold, wet, and scared.

At which point I remember telling the Lord, "Well, here I am again. If you do not catch me, I will absolutely hit with an impact I cannot begin to imagine."

And then I remember sitting quietly wondering what would happen next. And for another few moments, just like before, absolutely nothing changed. I continued to rocket to Earth, with no hope at all that I could do anything about it.

And then, even as before, wholly unexpected and without warning, I suddenly felt myself firmly safely and gently held in the hands of the Lord, and once again my soul heard his voice say firmly resolutely, "I have you."

Again, I have to admit to my amazement and surprise. I had no idea how He did what He had done. I only knew the reality of it. And in amazement and a growing sense of delight at my Lord's limitless ability to surprise me, and my own apparently limitless inability to imagine what He was able to do, I promptly fell back asleep.

When I got up the next morning, this time I no longer believed that I had somehow managed to conjure up my rescue on my own. The bleak, vivid contrast between my utter inadequacy and my Lord's incomprehensible provision for me left no doubt in my mind as to the divine reality of that provision.

Finally, just a few days after that, I once again awoke in the dead of night, feeling that terrible though familiar sensation of falling toward the earth, at a 1,000 miles an hour. Only this time, I vividly recall saying to myself, "You know, I've been here before. I know what I have, nothing, and I know what my Lord can do. I think I'll save myself the time and trouble and simply go back to sleep."

And that is what I did: having proven Himself wholly sufficient and incomprehensibility adequate to meet even my most desperate need, I did not need another demonstration. It was enough to know that He was there, and that He would catch me. Which only goes to show that though I am stupid, I *am* trainable.

The last example I will give is from the days I was hospitalized during my bone-marrow transplant. At the worst of that time, I felt so incredibly low, I felt so profoundly oppressed and buried in the deepest darkness. I had been re-reading *Lord of the Rings* and I immediately felt as if I had been buried miles underground, in the darkest depths of the Mines of Moria, a place described by Tolkien. I felt buried and compressed to the hardness of a ball-bearing, totally covered in darkness. And I had no way out – there was no way I could speed up my recovery, that I could dig my way out of this dark oppressive place. All I could do was sit there and wait as the minutes crawled by, one after the other, unable or unwilling to read or write, or talk to anyone. I was totally alone in my prison.

But suddenly and without any invitation whatsoever, I became profoundly aware of the presence of Jesus, sitting there beside me in the depths. Of course, He had always been there, but now I became acutely vividly aware of His personal presence. Wholly unexpected and unbidden, suddenly He was there and it was as if He had turned on a quiet, gentle, immensely comforting nightlight, there in the darkness now no longer dark. And He sat there quietly

beside me. I recall almost laughing in gratitude that He didn't begin some long terribly meaningful theological soliloquy – as badly as I felt at the time, I found human conversation so painful and difficult, it would have been like being trapped in a solitary cell with a babbling maniac. Instead, He simply sat with me – but here's the mystery – I found His simple loving presence immeasurably and incomprehensibly comforting. I didn't understand it then, nor can I explain it now, but His just being there, with me in that dark deep place suddenly made it no longer dark, and the depth no longer daunted me.

The effect was remarkable. *His* being there made *my* being there no longer terrible, no longer crushing. I was still there in the depths, but no longer alone and no longer in the dark. In fact, I recall being amazed at the realization that the prospect of having to come here again in the future, for another inevitable bone marrow transplant, no longer troubled me. I could consider the prospect with peace, almost equanimity.

It is His personal abiding presence in my heart, in my life, that continues to enable me to patiently wait and to find inexplicable comfort here even in the darkest corners of this world, and I've found some pretty dark ones. And even more, He gives me a growing sense of breathless anticipation about what awaits me beyond this broken world; He gives me a sense of joyous expectation about what He has in store for me, and for those that know Him, that makes me even LESS impressed with what this world has to offer.

It is those wonderful dual gifts - His presence with me here and His promise at what awaits me with Him in eternity, that make me able to consider the bleak observations of Solomon and yet have peace and hope. And like Paul, I can say to ANY one here today who does not know Jesus, that except for these chains of cancer I wear, I wish that you all could become such as I am now, because of Jesus.