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A Hole in the Soul
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(The following material is from The Gospel and the Twelve Steps: Following Jesus on the Path of Recovery, by Martin M. Davis)

In the First Step [of a program of recovery based on the Twelve Steps], we not only admit our powerlessness; we also admit that our lives have become unmanageable. The idea of unmanageability stirs up unhappy images of broken promises, failed commitments, destroyed relationships, unpaid bills, legal troubles, and wrecked physical health. Nevertheless, the unmanageability of addiction is far more serious than unpaid drunken-driving tickets or unanswered demands for back child-support payments. A discussion of unmanageability must address the spiritual emptiness that results from a prolonged lifestyle of addiction. Thus, admitting that our lives have become unmanageable requires us to recognize our spiritual impoverishment, that is, the bankruptcy of our souls.

To borrow the words of T.S. Eliot, addicts are hollow men lost in a spiritual wasteland. Their lives have no meaning and purpose; their souls are empty and hungry. Addiction is a prison of the soul. It separates that which is eternal within us from the higher power that is the wellspring of life. Therefore, our understanding of unmanageability must include the spiritual aspect of life.

The Richest Man in the World

To illustrate that unmanageability involves more than the obvious chaos of the personal, social, and material realms, let us consider Solomon, King of Israel. He was the richest, wisest man in the ancient world, a man whose life might seem anything but unmanageable.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon, is a remarkable illustration of the emptiness of life lived strictly on the horizontal plane, that is, in the material realm only. This enigmatic book, found in the Old Testament, was written by one whose wealth and wisdom were legendary, even in his own lifetime. The splendor and opulence of Solomon's riches, and the wisdom of his royal proclamations, were famous throughout the ancient world. Solomon had everything the material world could offer. As the Scriptures tell us, "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth" (1 Kings 10:23). His stores of gold, silver, jewels, and other material possessions were incredible. Besides his vast material wealth, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 mistresses! The Book of First Kings (Chapter 10), in the Old Testament, describes the extent of Solomon's riches. An appreciation of his vast wealth, and the material and sensual pleasures he enjoyed daily, is essential to grasp the bitter irony of his following words:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher [Solomon]. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (Eccles. 1:2)

How could a man who had everything the world could offer write such words of

soul-hollow despair? How could the wealthiest king of the ancient world describe life as meaningless?

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Eccles. 1:12-14)

Solomon had the financial means to fulfill his every worldly desire. He not only had it all, he had tried it all: wine, women, laughter and folly, the amassing of all kinds of possessions, the undertaking of great public works--everything he could imagine to fill the emptiness of his soul (Eccles. 2:1-9). Solomon denied himself nothing; he refused his heart no pleasure. Nevertheless, he found life meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Eccles. 2:10-11).

The entire Book of Ecclesiastes reeks of the hopelessness, despair, and utter emptiness of soul that plagued Solomon as his life became increasingly futile and meaningless. Though he possessed great worldly power and riches, Solomon ultimately experienced powerlessness and unmanageability. His encounter with powerlessness and unmanageability, however, was not the result of the loss of his family, friends, job, or reputation; he had not been sentenced to jail or required to do menial public service tasks as an act of restitution; his health and mental faculties remained stable. His desperate words make it clear, however, that his life had become unmanageable--soul-empty and bereft of meaning. It is essential to recovery that we understand the existential dilemma that confronted Solomon, for the lack of meaning that plagued his life also plagues our lives.

The Human Dilemma

Many today find no meaning for their lives. Dull routine, uninteresting jobs, and unfulfilling relationships characterize their existence. They experience no overriding purpose in life other than what they may create for themselves; any sense of ultimate meaning to life is absent. How did we reach this modern dilemma of soul-emptiness and despair? How did we become hollow men and women? One reason for our dilemma is our cultural rejection of the historic truths revealed in God's handbook for meaningful living, the Holy Bible. For a reliable understanding of our current dilemma, it is to those ancient teachings we must turn.

God did not create us to live without meaning or purpose; rather, our Creator designed us for relationship, both with God and others. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, walked with God in the Garden of Eden, they enjoyed an intimate, fulfilling relationship with their Creator. They communed with God in intimate companionship.

Their idyllic existence, however, was disrupted by sin. The serpent tempted our first parents by telling them they would be like God (Gen. 3:5). God is an independent, autonomous being; Adam and Eve were dependent creatures who relied on God for their well-being. For reasons that remain unclear to theologians, our first parents chose to heed the serpent's lie; they tried to break their dependence on God with a deliberate act of disobedience. Adam and Eve sought to be like God; they wanted to be independent, autonomous beings who answered to no power other than themselves. Theologian Alister McGrath writes, "Genesis 3 makes it clear that the fundamental sin of humanity lies in denying its creaturely status and attempting to become self-sufficient, placing itself in the place of God its creator."

Because of their rebellion, a great rift developed between our first parents and God. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden and forced to support themselves through hard labor and the sweat of their brows (Gen. 3:19,23). The consequences of their sin, known to theologians as the Fall, have burdened the human family since then. Because of their sin and

consequent estrangement from God, we are all born into a state of alienation and separation from God. Here, then, is our dilemma: We are made for relationship with the divine, yet that relationship has been severed by sin; therefore, we are left with a gnawing emptiness inside, a God-shaped vacuum once filled by our Creator.

Since we are separated from our Creator, we lack the intimacy with God that would fill our emptiness. Moreover, because our faculties of reason have been distorted by sin, our hearts have become darkened and our thinking has become futile (Rom. 1:21). Consequently, we irrationally seek to fill the void inside us with the things of the material world. The Christian psychologist, Larry Crabb, writes, "[W]hen God withdrew from Adam because of his sin, that capacity within Adam that enabled him to enjoy God suddenly was empty. The core became hollow. From his innermost being Adam longed for the fullness he had lost—but because of his darkened mind, he looked for it everywhere except in God." Like Adam, instead of seeking fulfillment in a dependent relationship with our Creator, we choose to reject fellowship with the divine. We seek fulfillment through money, possessions, power, relationships, and the many other concerns of life rooted in materiality. In addition, many of us seek to ease our existential pain with alcohol and drugs, or by engaging in other addictive behaviors.

In summary, God designed us to find fulfillment in relationship with him, yet we seek fulfillment in everything but God. Therefore, the core problem of human personality is "a steadfast determination to remain independent of God and still make life work." Those who doggedly seek meaning through the pursuit of money, sex, relationships, power, pleasure, and prestige are like thirsty travelers in the desert who pursue one mirage after another: they can never fill their thirst with phantom substitutes for living water.

Satisfying Our Thirst

Let us return to the story of Solomon to gain a clearer understanding of how his incredible life degenerated into utter meaninglessness. Perhaps we can learn a lesson for ourselves. The Scriptures tell us:

As Solomon grew old, his [pagan] wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (1 Kings 11:4)

Solomon had turned from the source of meaning; he had abandoned the wellspring of life. Though he possessed incredible wealth and enjoyed every sensual pleasure the world could offer, his life became utterly meaningless when he severed his connection to the source of meaning: the Creator God.

Perhaps now the futility of the human condition apart from God becomes clear. Because sin alienates us from God, we are left with a hole in our souls that only God can fill, yet we seek everything but God to fill it! Our misguided search for fulfillment results in the despair, emptiness, meaningless, hopelessness, and disappointment that characterize the lives of so many moderns.

The Bible describes our gnawing emptiness as "thirst." The psalmist writes:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (Ps. 42:1-2)

Our desperate thirst can be quenched only through restoration of our relationship to God. Only in relationship to God can we hope to find meaning and fulfillment in life. Only then can we function as we were designed. "Thou hast made us for Thyself," wrote the great

Christian thinker Augustine, "and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

Good News

There is good news, however; there is hope for our dilemma! Christianity proclaims the good news that God has already provided the means to restore our broken relationship with him. God has already supplied the living water needed to assuage our thirst. Jesus said, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Our spiritual thirst can be satisfied at the well of living water. In relationship with Jesus Christ, the spiritual emptiness that plagues our lives can be filled.

Christians in recovery who are familiar with the Twelve Steps may realize that Steps Two and Three address the solution to our existential dilemma of meaninglessness and lack of purpose. The wisdom of the Twelve Steps is apparent, for when we admit our powerlessness and unmanageability, we are invited to turn to a power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity. As we explore these next steps, we may gain a greater understanding of how our relationship with God may be restored and our human dilemma resolved.

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