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## Chasing after the Wind

**F**or what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?<sup>1</sup>, had asked Jesus to his disciples and the people around him. This question confronts us today, even more pertinently, in this age of globalization. A few years ago, the ad campaign of a newly launched mobile phone service in India had this punch line: 'grab the world in your fist!' Gaining the whole world is no longer just a fantasy but a dream that is becoming increasingly realizable. The process of material acquisition is, however, extremely demanding and it asks for our very self in return. While human society is said to be going digital, we also see that it is trying hard to retain its soul by simultaneously going spiritual.

One has only to do a little channel surfing to find the numerous television channels dishing out spirituality, 24 x 7, in different languages. They have the wise men and women explaining the scriptures, gurus narrating anecdotes from mythology, preachers telling amusing stories, choirs singing praises, people performing miracles. Some are heard shouting, some barely audible. Some are there to entertain us, others to intimidate us or to inspire awe. Many appear to be God's agents and some even try to appear God-like. But all of them hold out hope for our sagging spirits until we meet them again, same time next day, or same day next week.

Then there are newspapers that have space reserved daily for quotations from the sacred books and expressions of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:36 (King James Bible)

the thoughts of the wise and religious. The Sunday newspapers even offer complete pages of spiritual matter, produced by writers known and unknown, professional and amateur. They carry interviews with famous and successful people about how they feel about God or what they are doing about their souls. And we also have the bookshops that we can conveniently visit while waiting for a delayed flight or train to leave. They sell guides which promise to take us on a much faster spiritual journey.

What the King James Bible described as a 'vexation of spirit', has now been translated as 'chasing after the wind' in the New International Version or just 'chasing the wind' in the Good News Bible. However, both interpretations are correct, because the original words '*ruwach*' in the Old Testament Hebrew and '*pneuma*' in the New Testament Greek mean either 'spirit' or 'wind'. The spirit and the wind are indeed similar. Both are invisible, formless, active and powerful.

The phrase 'chasing after the wind', or its equivalent, appears only in one particular book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes, in the Old Testament. This is a philosophical book that attempts to find the meaning of human life on earth and ponders on its apparent futility, uselessness, unfair nature and lack of purpose. The book discusses the particular paradox that even after all human ambitions have been fulfilled, every kind of material pleasure has been enjoyed, or all wisdom has been acquired, happiness does not necessarily follow. So the tragedy is that when you crave for something, you are unhappy, and even when you actually get it, the happiness is only momentary.

The authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to Solomon, the wise, powerful, rich and famous king, who has everything and yet goes out in search of the meaning of life.

The author, who calls himself ‘the Teacher’<sup>2</sup> (also Preacher<sup>3</sup> or Philosopher<sup>4</sup>), tries to put himself through all kinds of physical and emotional experiences, but he cannot arrive at a convincing explanation of human life.

This is how the book of Ecclesiastes opens: *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.*<sup>5</sup>

The Teacher brings out the insignificance of human life against the permanence of the solid earth and the majesty of the heavenly bodies. He compares human toil with the movement pattern of the wind, what we now call the general circulation of the atmosphere. He also compares the emptiness of life with the sea, whose waters get evaporated as a part of the ceaseless process that we now describe as the hydrological cycle: *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.*<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher repeatedly<sup>7</sup> describes human toil as a ‘chasing after the wind’. The wind signifies life’s illusory goal, something that flies away as you try to reach it, what you cannot grasp or

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<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1 (King James Bible)

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1 (Good News Bible)

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1-5

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:6-7

<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:14, 1:16, 2:17, etc.

retain in your hands, something that is beyond understanding. *You do not know the path of the wind*, he says<sup>8</sup>.

It is the experience of the Teacher that the pursuit and achievement of wisdom, pleasure and riches, are all meaningless. He finds so much oppression, toil, envy and loneliness everywhere in this world. He accepts that life can be unfair and that the labours of men do not necessarily bring in commensurate rewards. However, the beauty of the book of Ecclesiastes lies in that its author is not pessimistic about life, and his sad inferences are interspersed with several positive thoughts and advice. Again and again, he tells us that it is the gift of God that we should live a happy life, find enjoyment in our work and have gladness of heart<sup>9</sup>. The Teacher particularly cautions against excessive worry about what may happen tomorrow. And here again, he uses wind and weather to make his point: *Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it. Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap*<sup>10</sup>.

What we see all around us today is the simplification and commercialization of spirituality. We are advised to play soulful CDs in the background, commune with nature, take a dip in the river, attempt mountain treks, visit holy lands, and so on. Spirituality is indeed easy, simple and beautiful when God is kept out of it. In today's world, the book of Ecclesiastes is a reminder that we have to stand in awe of God<sup>11</sup>, not in awe of nature or in awe of technology. And at the end of the book, we are clearly warned against the

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<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 11:5

<sup>9</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:22, 5:19, 5:20, etc.,

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:7-8, 11:4

<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:7

exclusion of God from our lives, and told what we are expected to do: *Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man*<sup>12</sup>.



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<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13