

TED Conference (Technology, Entertainment, Design)
 Monterey Conference Center, California
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 --- previous speaker = Larry Ellison

Introduction

I have heard and read a great deal about
the Ted Conference, but frankly I never
 thought it would be possible for me to be part
 of such a strategic event.

I want to commend Richard for having the
vision for such a gathering, and thank him
especially for including religion on the agenda
 and inviting me to be part of this conference.

As a clergyman, you can imagine how lost I feel in areas such as science and technology.

I was preaching in San Jose several months ago, and my friend Mark Kvamme invited some of the leaders of several major companies which are on the cutting edge of the technological revolution to brief me on some of the latest breakthroughs.

It was an eye-opening and stimulating
experience for me, and our organization is
already exploring ways we can use these new
technologies to extend our work.

I know we're near the end of this
conference, and some of you may be
wondering about having a speaker from
the field of religion.

Some years ago I got on an elevator in a hotel, and a few floors later another man got on.

He said, "I hear Billy Graham is staying in this hotel," and someone else replied, "That's right -- he's right here in this elevator."

He turned and looked me up and down for a few seconds, and then he said, "My, what an anti-climax!"

I hope you won't feel these few minutes are an anticlimax to this conference!

During some of this conference you have been talking about technological revolutions which stagger our imaginations.

Even as we try to peer into the future, as you have been doing, I'm sure we would be overwhelmed if we could actually see what the world is going to be like ten or twenty years from now.

✓ This is not the first time, however, that the human race has undergone a technological revolution.

Three thousand years ago a young man by the name of David became king of the nation of Israel.

When he came to the throne, Israel was divided, backward, and oppressed by its neighbors. It was little more than a cluster of primitive tribes living in tents and barely scratching a living from the land.

But when King David died forty years later, all that had changed.

In only one generation, Israel became one of the strongest, most prosperous nations in the Near East.

In fact, in those few decades, Israel experienced the greatest social and economic progress in its history.

What happened? Certainly David was a man of exceptional leadership ability and he had the favor of his God.

But there was another reason: King David introduced into Israel a new technology.

About two centuries before, the Hittites had discovered the secret of smelting and processing iron. Slowly the skill spread, but for many decades Israel's enemies deliberately kept it away.

But David changed all that, and he introduced the Iron Age to Israel. The Bible says that David laid up "great stores of iron," and in recent years archaeologists have discovered many iron mines and smelters in Palestine from this era.

Now, instead of crude tools made of sticks
and stones, Israel had iron plows, sickles,
hoes, axes, and other iron implements.

And in the course of only one generation,
Israel was completely changed.

The introduction of iron, in some ways,
had an impact on David's day like the
microchip is having today.

One day King David sat down to reflect on what was happening. He was not only a great ruler, but he was a great poet, philosopher and musician.

A technological revolution had changed the lives of his people, but as he looked at life, he realized there were several problems technology had not solved.

In the Psalms, David speaks to a number of these problems.

And they are still with us, for they are moral and spiritual problems, and only moral and spiritual answers can solve them.

I want to address three of these problems.

What are they?

The first problem King David saw was the problem of human evil.

Over and over again in the Psalms, David describes the evils of the human race. And yet he says about God in Psalms 23, “He restores my soul.”

Have you ever thought about what a contradiction we are?

On one hand we can probe the deepest secrets of the universe and dramatically push back the frontiers of technology -- as this conference vividly demonstrates.

ILL: The sea and galaxies

On the other hand, however something is wrong. We are a speck in the vast cosmos.

We can't get along with other people, even in our own families.

We find ourselves in the paralyzing grip of self-destructive habits we can't break.

Racism and injustice and violence sweep our world, bringing a tragic harvest of heartache and death.

Even the most sophisticated among us
seem powerless to break the cycle.

The Bible says the problem is within us --
within our hearts and souls. Our problem is
that we are separated from God, and we need
to have our souls restored -- something only
God can do.

Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil
thoughts, murder, sexual immorality, theft,
false testimony, slander."

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell was not a religious man, but he agreed with Jesus at this point when he said, "It is in our hearts that the evil lies, and is from our hearts that it must be plucked out."

Albert Einstein once declared pessimistically, "It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man."

Many of you have probably puzzled over this.

You have seen people take beneficial
technological advances -- such as the Internet
-- and twist them into something corrupting.

You have seen brilliant people devise
computer viruses that bring down whole
systems.

The Oklahoma City bombing was simple
technology horribly used.

The problem is not the technology, but the
person using the technology.

King David himself knew the depths of
evil in his own soul. He couldn't free himself
from personal sins, which included adultery
and murder.


Yet King David sought God's forgiveness
and said, "You restore my soul."

You see the Bible teaches that we are not
simply bodies and minds, but we also have
souls.

Your soul is that part of you which yearns for meaning in life, and which seeks for something beyond this life. It is that part of you which yearns for God.

Even if you have no religious belief, there are times when you wonder if there is something more.

Thomas Edison said, "When you see everything that happens in the world of science, and in the working of the universe, you cannot deny that there is a 'captain on the bridge.'"

 I remember once I sat beside Mrs.
Gorbachev at a White House dinner.

I went to Ambassador Dobrynin, whom I
knew very well, and said, "I'm going to be
sitting next to Mrs. Gorbachev. What should I
talk about?"

He surprised me with his answer:
"Talk with her about religion and philosophy.
That's what she's really interested in."

And I found out he was right, and we had a very stimulating conversation.

Afterward she said, "You know, I am an atheist. But I still can't help but feel that there must be something more, something higher."

The second problem King David
realized he could not solve is the problem of
human suffering.

Writing the oldest book in the world, Job said, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward."

Yes, to be sure, science has done much to push back certain types of human suffering.

As someone who is almost 80 years of age, I admit I'm very grateful for all the medical advances that have kept me in relatively good health all these years. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for some of them.

But think of the suffering we face today.

Inner-city children trapped in cycles of
despair.

Children of divorce, whom researchers
increasingly describe as carrying deep and
lasting wounds.

And around the world are orphans and
desperate children in country after country
torn apart by war.

Even here among those of us most
protected against poverty and violence,
families self-destruct, friends betray us,
unbearable psychological pressures bear
down on us.

I have never met a person who did not
have some kind of problem or worry, no
matter how successful or prominent they were.

Why do we suffer? -- that is an age-old
question none of us can fully answer.

David, too, knew heartbreak.

His own deceit caused the death of his
infant son.

His children were involved with rape,
revenge, and murder.

His son Absalom led a revolt against him.

Yet David, again and again, in the most agonizing circumstances, turned to God and could say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

The final problem King David knew he could not solve is death.

Many commentators have said that death is the forbidden subject of our generation.

Most people live as if they were never going to die.

Technology projects the myth of control
over our mortality.

We see people on our screens who have
died, but they seem so alive. And it is often
difficult for some young people to
comprehend death.

But it is inevitable.

As the ancient writer of Ecclesiastes declared, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die."

A few years ago, a university student asked me what was the greatest surprise of my life, and I replied, "Its brevity."

This, then, is humanity's threefold dilemma: iniquity, suffering, and death.

Technology may delay them, but it cannot solve them.

They are ultimately spiritual problems, and they demand spiritual answers.

As we approach the dawn of a new millennium, we need a moral dimension more than ever. Without it, the 21st Century could become the bloodiest and most tragic in the history of the human race. It could be the last century.

But it does not need to be this way.

Wernher von Braun, in the aftermath of World War II, concluded, “Science and religion are not antagonists. On the contrary, they are sisters.”

He then put it on a personal basis:

Dr. Von Braun said, “Speaking for myself, I can only say that the grandeur of the cosmos serves only to confirm my belief in the certainty of a Creator.”

He also said, "In our search to know God,
I have come to believe that the life of Jesus
Christ should be the focus of our efforts and
inspiration.

"The reality of this life and his resurrection
is the hope of mankind."

ILL: German leader - Adenauer

In the midst of all the exciting things you
are doing, I pray you will not starve your soul.

In one of his plays, Alexander Solzhenitsyn depicts a man dying, who says to those gathered around his bed, "... the moment when it's terrible to feel regret is when one is dying ... How should one live in order not to feel regret when one is dying?"

Blaise Pascal asked exactly that question in 17th Century France. Pascal has been called one of the architects of modern civilization.

He was a brilliant scientist at the frontiers of mathematics, even as a teenager.

He is viewed by many as the founder of probability theory and as creator of the first model of a computer.

And, of course, you are all familiar with the computer language named for him.

Pascal explored in depth our human dilemmas of evil, suffering, and death.

He was astounded at the phenomena we have been considering -- that people can achieve extraordinary heights in science, the arts, and human enterprise.

Yet they are also full of anger, hypocrisy, and self-hatreds.

Pascal saw us as a remarkable mixture of genius and self-delusion.

On November 23, 1654, Pascal had a profound religious experience.

He wrote these words about it in his journal:

“I submit myself absolutely to Jesus
Christ, my redeemer.”

A French historian has said: “Seldom has
so mighty an intellect submitted with such
humility to the authority of Jesus Christ.”

Pascal came to believe that only the love
and grace of God could bring us back into
harmony.

He experienced it in a way that went beyond scientific observation and reason. It was he who penned the well-known words,
“the heart has its reasons, which reason knows not of.”

Equally well-known is Pascal's wager. Essentially he said this: “If you bet on God and open yourself to his love, you lose nothing, even if you're wrong. But if instead you bet that there is no God -- then you can lose your very soul.”

For Pascal, scientific knowledge paled
beside knowledge of God. He was ready to
face Him when he died at age 39.

King David lived to be 70 -- a long time in
that era.

Yet he, too, had to face death and wrote,
“Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you
are with me.”

This was David's answer to the three
dilemmas of evil, suffering, and death.

It can be yours as well as you seek the
living God and allow Him to fill your life and
give you hope for the future.

BG/DB - 2/98