

Ecclesiastes 1:16-2:26

The Quest

King Solomon who wrote Ecclesiastes was a seeker on a quest for the meaning and purpose of life. This quest for insight and wisdom fits what other Scriptures tell us about Solomon. When he became king, God gave him the opportunity of a lifetime: Solomon could ask for anything he desired. Solomon asked for wisdom so that he could rightly govern the nation.

The Bible then states that God gave Solomon “a wise and understanding heart.”¹ This does not mean that the king understood everything at once. He still had to apply himself to the pursuit of knowledge. He did just that, but not as we would expect. Solomon took hundreds of foreign wives and concubines. And he let their idolatry influence him. So he began to search for the meaning and purpose of life “under the sun”, apart from God. In one sense we should be glad that he did. This is because he left us an account of the futility of life without trust in God.

The last time we were in Ecclesiastes Solomon stated his theme; all of life is a vapor, a mist, vanity, here today and gone tomorrow. Today we will read about the experiences in his life that led to his conclusion.

I communed with my heart, saying, “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.”

¹⁷ And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much grief,
And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
(Ecclesiastes 1:16-18)

In his attempt to gain wisdom Solomon searched out all of history, sorting through the good and the bad. He examined the rise and fall of nations. He read the important thinkers and innovators of his day. He received his Bachelor's degree and then his Masters and finally his Ph.D. But he did so with “madness and folly.” This doesn't mean he was insane. These words are used elsewhere in

¹ 1 Kings 3:12

the Old Testament for living life without regard to God. For example, Psalm 14:1 tells us "The fool has said in his heart 'There is no God.'" When the Word of God tells us the fool says there is no God, it is not referring to a stupid person. Very intelligent people say there is no God, so too do dumb people. They are fools because the evidence of creation points to a Creator, God.²

Understand, Solomon wasn't trying to be a bad person, but he was trying to find meaning to life and answers to big questions without God. Like Solomon, people today claim that a good education solves almost any problem. If only everyone had a good education there would be no more political problems, no poverty, no international crisis. There would be no teen pregnancy or long unemployment lines. And there would be great contentment in our hearts.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a good education, but Solomon found that human wisdom alone has no answers to life's questions and problems. It simply brings grief and sorrow, because even with all of our Ph.Ds. life still has profound problems. So the Preacher left college life for Las Vegas. If wisdom is not the answer, then what's next? Maybe the answer is in the chorus to an old Peggy Lee song?

Is that all there is my friends?
Then let's keep dancing.
Let's break out the booze and have a ball.³

And that's exactly what Solomon did.

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity.
²I said of laughter—"Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" ³I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.
(Ecclesiastes 2:1-3)

Like Jesus Christ's parable of the prodigal son⁴ the king gorged himself on pleasure. But unlike the prodigal son his money never ran out! To be honest with you what a blast they must have had in the palace. Just imagine how the place must have shaken with parties and laughter. The king and his entourage

² Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20-22

³ by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller

⁴ Luke 15:11-32

stimulated themselves with wine and singing and stand-up comedy. But when all was said and done Solomon went to bed and woke up empty and unfulfilled.

Now, the Preacher is not saying that laughter and parties are bad. The Bible never says that either. There are a number of parties and feasts mentioned in Scripture. But here's what Proverbs 14:12 and 13 have to say,

There is a way *that* seems right to a man,
But its end *is* the way of death.
¹³ Even in laughter the heart may sorrow,
And the end of mirth *may* be grief.

Why is this so? The answer is that a life based solely on pleasure cannot cope with life's harsh realities. Think of all the celebrities who have partied till they burned out. I can remember as a kid my parents and grandparents saying something like, "You keep goofing and laughing like that and you'll end up crying." And sure enough we would do something stupid to spoil our fun and bring us to tears. It is like that in life too.

Well, not being a man who gives up easily, determined to find meaning and happiness without God, Solomon moved from hedonism to materialism. If I were creative I'd have Madonna sing "I am a material girl" as we read the next few verses.

I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. ⁵I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all *kinds* of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. ⁷I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house.

Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, *and* musical instruments of all kinds.
(Ecclesiastes 2:4-8)

Boy, now that was the good life if ever there was one. Solomon was a city planner, an urban renewal expert. He built parks and houses, hundreds of them for his hundreds of wives. In fact his own home took fourteen years⁵ to build

⁵ 1 Kings 7:1

while he only spent seven years on the temple!⁶ He also had hundreds of slaves and tons of money. And then our translation of the Bible, in verse 8 says “the delights of the sons of men...musical instruments of all kinds.” Now, I enjoy music as much as the next guy, but I wouldn’t call it the delights of men. The Hebrew actually says, “the delights of the sons of men—voluptuous women of all kinds.” In other words concubines; party girls.

So I became great and excelled more than all
who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom
remained with me.

¹⁰ Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.
I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure,
For my heart rejoiced in all my labor;
And this was my reward from all my labor.
(Ecclesiastes 2:9, 10)

Solomon prospered. He left his predecessors in the dust. He engaged in every impulse. He did whatever he wanted to do. He never said no to himself. But the happiness and satisfaction was short lived.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done
And on the labor in which I had toiled;
And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind.
There was no profit under the sun.
(Ecclesiastes 2:11)

The king said “I did it all. I did it my way. But it is all vanity, a vapor—meaning nothing.” Why would he say that? Here’s the answer. Wind, flood, fire and time will take their toll on the things we build. Money goes as easily as it comes. Beauty fades and sex loses its power. Therefore true joy and meaning and satisfaction cannot originate in or be sustained by anything under the sun.

Now, in verses 12 to 23 Solomon compares finding meaning and purpose in life through wisdom with finding these with pleasure and folly. He does this because someone could come along and say “Hey, Sol, the reason you are burned out and empty is because you went at this the wrong way. You used your wisdom while seeking pleasure. Stop thinking. There is no meaning, so just enjoy yourself until the end.”

Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness
and folly; For what can the man do who succeeds the

⁶ 1 Kings 6:37, 38

king?—Only what he has already done.
(Ecclesiastes 2:12)

Solomon's point is this: no one can challenge the Preacher's judgment on all of this, because no one could exceed his resources. He had the money, the time and the power to do it all wisely and with abandon. And he did. The people who follow can only do what Solomon had done. So if you are going to live under the sun, without God, at least do so with wisdom and not folly. But in the end you still will be left empty.

Then I saw that wisdom excels folly
As light excels darkness.
(Ecclesiastes 2:13)

If you are going to live “under the sun” it is better to do so wisely than foolishly. If you don't you'll often be fooled and you may get involved in things that are dangerous. Just as a flash light makes walking in the dark easier and safer, so wisdom can make life easier and keep you safe. But with all of its advantages a wise person cannot escape what a foolish person cannot escape. They are on the same conveyor belt to the same ending.

The wise man's eyes *are* in his head,
But the fool walks in darkness.
Yet I myself perceived
That the same event happens to them all.

¹⁵ So I said in my heart,
“As it happens to the fool,
It also happens to me,
And why was I then more wise?”
Then I said in my heart,
“This also *is* vanity.”

¹⁶ For *there is* no more remembrance of the wise
than of the fool forever,
Since all that now *is* will be forgotten in the days to come.
And how does a wise *man* die?
As the fool!
(Ecclesiastes 2:14-16)

In the end, “under the sun” all an educated person can do is die an educated person. All a fool can do is die a fool. Alexander the Great learned this lesson in a dramatic way from his friend Diogenes, a famous philosopher. Alexander found his friend standing in a field looking intently at a large pile of

bones. When Alexander asked what he was doing, Diogenes said, "I am searching for the bones of your father, Philip, but I cannot tell them apart from the bones of the slaves."⁷

Wisdom is important, but it cannot prevent the ultimate end of life. Nor can it halt the effect of death for those apart from God—they will perish forever. True wisdom involves something more than what is "under the sun." Psalm 111:10 declares, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*..." And those who possess the wisdom from God in their hearts and believe it will never perish, but will receive everlasting life!⁸ But, now Solomon makes a stunning statement.

Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 2:17)

It is one thing to be disappointed in life, it is quite another to hate it. Do you know what is so tragic about this? Solomon eventually found a way up. He returned to God. But sadly many smart people never do. The philosopher Voltaire wrote to a friend and said, "I hate life, and yet I am afraid to die."⁹ Solomon never experienced life in the gutter. He had it all, but without God he had nothing. I believe this kind of despair is the reason for the unexpected suicides of famous people. They have it all, but in the end they have nothing.

Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.

²⁰ Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. ²¹ For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?

⁷ T. M. Moore, Ecclesiastes: Ancient Wisdom When All Else Fails, (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity press, 2001), p. 68

⁸ Daniel 12:1-3; John 3:16

⁹ J. Blanchard, Where Do We Go From here?, (Darlington, UK, Evangelical Press, 2003), p.4

²³ For all his days *are* sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23)

Someday, someone will end up with your BMW that you handled with kid gloves and spill coffee all over the interior. Someone will own your beautiful home and paint it a gaudy shade of pink. Your favorite pair of \$400 shoes will end up at Good Will." Psalm 127:1 proclaims, "Unless [Yahweh] builds the house, they labor in vain who build it."

It is not wrong to dedicate your life to academics, sports, science, business, music, art or carpentry or anything else. But you cannot take your accomplishments into the grave. And if you have lived your life "under the sun" then it was all in vain! But as a believer in God the motivation for your work and the goal of your work may have a great reward in the coming kingdom of God. Let me show you what I mean from the New Testament.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:9-15)

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ you have work to do for the glory of God and the good of others. If you raise children for the glory of God, if you master science for the glory of God, if you work and serve in whatever capacity for the glory of God, then your work will be rewarded and applauded forever. All other selfish, vain-glorious works will be burned and you will lose. Let's return to Ecclesiastes.

Nothing *is* better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his

labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.
²⁵ For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment,
more than I?

(Ecclesiastes 2:24, 25)

There is again a translation problem in verse 24. The words “better...*than*” are not in the Hebrew text. Here is what the text actually says. “To eat and drink and experience pleasure for his labors, this does not come from any good in a person.” So where does it come from?

For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

(Ecclesiastes 2:26)

In the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 6 we are told to trust in the living God “who gives us richly all things to enjoy.”¹⁰ A great contrast exists between the ultimate end of the one who loves God and the one who does not. Ultimately, all that the unbelieving acquire will belong to those who are God’s people. The Book of Revelation tells us that a day is coming when, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.”¹¹

Everything in the world will one day belong to God and to Jesus Christ.¹² And because you are a child of God, it will all belong to you too. Romans 8:16 states that you and I are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” If we live our lives, in all that we do, trusting God and following Jesus Christ, we will be blessed by God’s grace now and rewarded exceedingly in the age to come. Everything else is vanity---all of it.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 6:17

¹¹ Revelation 11:15

¹² Psalm 2:7, 8

