

The Joy of Meaninglessness?

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Date: 29 January 2023

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[0 : 0 0] continuing our studies in Ecclesiastes. We're reading today from chapter 1, verses 12 through to chapter 2, verse 26. So Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 12.

I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. I said to myself, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be meaningless. Laughter, I said, is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish? [1 : 3 5] I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed gold. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure.

[2 : 4 9] My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet, when I surveyed that all my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun.

Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness. But I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I said to myself, the fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? I said to myself, this too is meaningless. For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered. The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die.

So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then they must leave all the own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor are not to do? This too is meaningless. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases God, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness.

But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

This too is meaningless. A chasing after the wind. Okay, do please keep open, if you can, that section from Ecclesiastes 1 and 2.

The 20th century philosopher Albert Camus said, if we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning, and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. Camus asserts the fundamental absurdity of existence. There's no meaning, no purpose. Existence is not fully intelligible by rational analysis. And this philosophical approach is kind of symbolized by Sisyphus, you know, that king condemned to push the immense boulder up the hill just for it to roll back down to the start endlessly for all eternity. A laborious and futile task. So thinks Camus. And it sure sounds a lot like the attitude of the teacher in today's reading from Ecclesiastes, doesn't it? And again, as we saw last week, I suspect for many of us there is much that resonates in those kinds of attitudes and those ideas that we find not only in philosophy but also here in God's Word. This section of the book we're now expanding on the summary thesis that we thought about in the first 11 verses last week. Life and everything is utterly meaningless, says the teacher. That's the summary of verse 2. Life is brief. It's like a whisper in the wind. It's there, but it's ultimately insubstantial. Life is repetitive. The things we've done, we do again. It's true on an individual scale and it's true on a historical scale. Life under the sun is but a breath. There's nothing to be gained. Now coming from that thesis, the teacher now picks up this theme and examines it. And in this section, he considers three possible counter-arguments, if you like. Three possible sources of meaning, three challenges to his thesis of meaninglessness. He asks, what about wisdom? Is there meaning to be found in wisdom? Or what about pleasure? Is there some purpose in happiness? What about hard work and great achievements? Is there any lasting gain? And over the course of these verses, all of these possible escape routes from the pessimism of the introduction, all of these escape routes are systematically shut off one by one.

[8 : 41] There's only one certainty, he says, and that is death. Verse 16, like the fool, the wise too must die. So he tells us his conclusion up front here in verse 14. All things under the sun are meaningless.

But don't let the fact that he gives you the conclusion at the start suggest that there's anything lacking in the attempt. This isn't that he's just kind of got a preconceived idea and he's finding the evidence to support it. Now verse 13 is very clear. He is honestly setting out to see, is there any purpose? What is the meaning of life? He sets out to explore all that is done under the heavens. No possibility escapes his notice and consideration. Everything this life has to offer, he goes and he tests it out. He devotes his whole self to this comprehensive task. The verse begins, I applied my mind. He thinks about it carefully. That's a helpful translation. But rightly understood, there's even more going on here. See, the literal words are he applied his heart. And the thing about the heart in the Bible is it's not about the emotions. The heart is about the core of the being, my inner self. It is the mind. It's the will. It's the seat of the whole personality. So for the teacher, this is a focused, disciplined pursuit. His whole self is given over to this task of finding out what is the point. Why bother? And verse 13 tells us that wisdom is kind of the overall paradigm for his investigation. But interestingly, it's also the first subject of his investigation.

Verses 16 and following make that clear. Now, verse 16 maybe sounds a little bit arrogant, doesn't it? But actually, he's not just boasting when he says, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. He's not boasting. Actually, he's giving his credentials. When you invite someone to speak at an event, you put a brief bio on the publicity and you introduce them on the platform, not just by saying their name, but you say which university they're based at or which company they work for, whatever it might be. And why do we do that? Well, at least in part, we do that to encourage the audience to take this person seriously. It's an answer to the question, why should we listen to you? Well, why should you listen to this teacher about wisdom? Because he's wiser than anyone else. There isn't a danger that someone else is going to come along in the future with a better answer. He really has thought it through. He really does have insights. And that fits, doesn't it, with what we know about King Solomon. Solomon granted wisdom by God, as recounted in the early introduction to his reign. Solomon, the author of much of the book of Proverbs, he really does have this wisdom. If Solomon can't find meaning in wisdom, then who else has any hope of doing so? There's a reason why the wisdom of Solomon is a proverbial saying. He's the right man for the job. The wisdom's real, and he applies himself to this question.

And it's an interesting one, isn't it?

[11:53] Verse 17, he says, I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. Now, I think we're meant to understand this at this point as comparing the two, wisdom as against madness and folly. And at the start of chapter two, he's going to consider the value of laughter and madness as part of exploring pleasure. But here at this point, at the end of chapter one, it's more a question of which of these is better. In any case, the outcome's clear. This too is a chasing after the wind. There's nothing there. It eludes us. The moment you think you've got something, it's gone. So he summarizes his finding in a proverb, with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. Now, as is often the case with proverbs, I don't think we're meant to think that this is universally the case. But still, there's truth there, isn't there? This resonates for us, doesn't it?

Because the problem is the more we learn, the more we learn things that actually we'd rather not know. Too often, it's more comfortable actually not to have asked the question in the first place, because you find out you don't like the answer. We investigate and we learn things about the frailty and the failings of other human beings. We learn things about ourselves that we don't like. We learn about all the problems in the world and we realize that we were happier at not knowing. How many of us have said at some point, I can't cope with watching the news at the moment. It's just too much. I don't want to know. It's too painful. Children, of course, constantly wish that they knew some of the things that their parents shield them from. But as we look back as adults, aren't we glad to have had our innocence preserved? Don't we wish sometimes that we could wind the clock back to those easier days? It's the same at work.

The more you know, the more jobs you get given. It's the same as we speak to one another, that we hear one another's problems and difficulties. And it can be painful. And sometimes there's part of the more we know, the more we know, the more we know. It's one of my great privileges as a minister to be alongside in the midst of difficulty. But it is true, the more knowledge, the more grief.

[14:11] It's true in all kinds of arenas, isn't it? Breakthrough inventions that leads to all kinds of grief. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, maybe the most obvious example, he witnessed one of the test explosions and said, I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

The more knowledge, the more grief. Ignorance is bliss. Wisdom doesn't deliver on its promise, does it? Wisdom doesn't bring all the answers. So what do we make of that? What do you think? Does that fit with your experience of life? Does it match up with what you know of wisdom from the rest of the Bible? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. And Daniel's prophecy, at that time, Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress, such as not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time, your people, everyone whose name is found written in the book, will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. The Bible as a whole seems to think wisdom is pretty important, doesn't it? Actually, I think you could argue from God's word that wisdom has ultimate value in some sense. Daniel here links possessing wisdom with experiencing everlasting life. So what's going on then with the teacher here in Ecclesiastes? Well, the thing is, not all wisdom is created equal. By which I mean, the word wisdom is really quite broad. In fact, the Hebrew word, we don't always translate it as wisdom. Sometimes we refer to knowledge or even to skill. So the workers who are assigned to construct the tabernacle back in the days of the Exodus, they're described using this same term, but clearly what's meant is craftsmanship, expertise. Wisdom is a very broad term. So how is it being used here in Ecclesiastes?

Well, it's not about skill, is it? This clearly is a philosophical exercise. It's wisdom as we understand it, but I suggest it's still not wisdom in all its fullness.

[16:38] Philip Riken puts it this way. He says, the kind of wisdom the preacher had in mind was not divine wisdom, but human wisdom. The very best that human beings have ever thought or said.

And it's good to look for that kind of wisdom, isn't it? God gave us minds. He intends that we use them. All truth is God's truth. There can sometimes be help in the self-help books. Doctors can and do have an understanding of neurochemistry that helps them address at least the feeling of meaninglessness for some. But the trouble is that wisdom only gets you so far.

If you like, that kind of wisdom may address the experience, and it can be genuinely helpful, but wisdom doesn't ultimately provide the answers. That kind of wisdom doesn't lead us to know and worship the one true God. That kind of wisdom doesn't lead us into relationship with Jesus, and therefore it will not, it cannot provide ultimate satisfaction.

Augustine of Hippo said, you have formed us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. So much for wisdom under the sun.

Having considered wisdom, the teacher turns at the start of chapter 2 to consider pleasure as a possibility, and we're going to come to that next week. Though, spoiler alert, we will find, verse 11, that too is meaningless. But pausing on pleasure for now, we find the teacher in verse 12 returning to the theme of wisdom. We're not done with wisdom after all. See, like many of us, the teacher seems not to trust his first verdict, and so he swings back around for another bite at the cherry. You know how when you're looking for something, no matter how many times you've looked already, you keep coming back to the place where it should be, just in case you somehow missed it the first six times. Well, that's what the teacher is doing here. This is where the answer should be found.

[18:42] It should be found in wisdom, and so to wisdom he returns. Again, verse 12, he asserts his credentials. He's not worried his efforts will be surpassed. Although, as one commentator helpfully points out, this is more a lament than a boast, isn't it? You kind of get the impression he'd really be quite pleased if someone did do better than he has. But he's confident it's not going to happen.

But, verse 13, first half of verse 14, it starts off a lot more encouraging than what we've seen so far, doesn't it? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness. This is what we expect to hear, isn't it? There's value in wisdom, and of course there is. Up to this point, his verdict on everything has been the same. It's all been declared meaningless, a mere breath, an irrelevance. Previously, wisdom even was a source of vexation. But here at last, here he now praises the relative value of wisdom. Granted, 115, it can't straighten that which is crooked, it can't count what's missing. But still, all things considered, wisdom's better than the alternative. Why stumble in the dark when you can switch on the lights? Understanding's better than ignorance, he concludes. And this attitude, understanding is better than ignorance. Wisdom has the answers. This is often the attitude with which we're presented, isn't it? The answer to what ails society is education. If only everyone had a better education, there'd be no political instability, there'd be no international or interracial tensions, there'd be no teenage pregnancies, there'd be no depression, there'd be no stress. All would be well if we just had better education. And so our government set goals for the number of people who will go to university. Education, we're told, is a silver bullet that will be not only the key to economic prosperity, but will also solve all of the social problems of our day and every day. Education, wisdom, will lead to societal advancement and to personal prosperity. In that context, the second half of verse 14 crashes in as an unwelcome interruption.

[21:09] The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness, but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Two things in life are certain, death and taxes. And frankly, if you're Solomon, taxes aren't so much a frustration as your source of revenue, but even he cannot escape death.

Even he is forced to reckon with the great leveler. Maybe he's aware of the Egyptian approach. You make sure you're buried with the best of your earthly goods so you can take them with you into the next world. But he knows that's a load of nonsense. He's wise enough to see that however many pockets you sow into the shroud, they don't do you any good. Because death comes to rich and poor alike.

It comes to the professor and to the village idiot. It comes to those of every creed and every nationality. And people sometimes try and get around this, don't they? You think you can get around the reality of death with some kind of significant achievement. Live on through your body of work. Make an impact on the world. And Solomon explores something along these lines in other parts of the chapter that again will come back to you next week. But ultimately that approach too rings hollow.

Woody Allen very appropriately said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying. I want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen. I want to live on in my apartment. Well quite. That sort of pseudo-immortality is nothing at all, is it? Why is it that some of the richest men in the world pour their capital into researching life-extending treatments and plans

to live on? Because they know that death will come for them too one day. They know it comes to us all.

And it renders everything under the sun completely meaningless. Even wisdom has no ultimate worth if we're not around to exercise it. Derek Kidner says, this of course is why the purely human achievements which we call lasting are nothing of the kind. As men of the world we may revere them in this way but only for lack of the teacher's honesty in seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. The teacher has no illusions. Though by rights it is we who should have none. We who've heard from the secularists themselves that our very planet is dying when we think about the meaninglessness of pleasure and of toil. But see, wisdom doesn't exist exclusively under the sun, does it? No, the Bible does show us where we can find fuller wisdom, where we can find life transforming wisdom, where we can find life giving wisdom. Colossians 3 invites us, set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

[24 : 18] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. See, when we lift our gaze above the world under the sun. In fact, we lift our gaze above the sun itself. We lift our gaze to the heavenly throne room and we see our Savior seated at the right hand of God. In him, in him are all the treasures of wisdom because he has conquered the grave. Because he has conquered the grave, then the words of Psalm 49, 15, really are true. He really will redeem his people from the realm of the dead. And folks, that eternal perspective, that knowledge that our lives are safe with Christ in God, that perspective gives us hope not just for tomorrow, but also for today.

We're only a couple of weeks into this series. I'm finding this a really tricky balance. Wanting to let the real struggles, the real questions that this book asks, wanting to give those struggles space and for us to grapple together with these realities. And wanting, yes, to leave you pondering, leave you unsatisfied through the week. I'm grappling with balancing that desire against not wanting to leave us feeling depressed and hopeless. Folks, I'm really sorry if I'm not getting that balance right. If you want to talk to me as ever, I'd love to speak to you afterwards.

I'd love to get together during the week and we can talk more about these things. Please don't despair. Please don't feel hopeless. There is more to come in this book. There is better to come in this book.

But just now, let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you for the wisdom that we find in your words. We thank you that here we find the realities of life examined and considered. We thank you for the honesty, with which the teacher speaks. And we pray that picking up with him these possibilities and considerations may be to us ultimately an encouragement. Lord, guard us against feelings of despair, knowing that true wisdom is found in you, that there is better wisdom than what this world has to offer. There is greater wisdom found in you, in the fuller revelation of your salvation plan, in the good news of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.