
Meaning

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Two balloons and a book:

Both balloons are pretty, eye-catching, pleasing.

The balloons are also fragile and vulnerable.

The book is not so attractive but seems much more permanent and sturdy.

As you listen this morning, I want you to think about something: which one of these is closer to how you understand your life?

Solomon sets out on a quest, an investigation. He is going to see what living a certain way reveals. He is not doing it as an outside observer. He is doing it as a participant.

We can understand some of the reasoning here. I see in myself and in many Christians a similar but probably unrecognized and unspoken rationale.

Life has many ordinary pleasures: family, sport, home, spouse, intellectual pursuit (wisdom)...

These pleasures are given and commended to us by God...

Why then would I not want to have greater pleasure by more of?

So, Solomon does this and then reports on the result. He finds what we all know to be true but often don't really believe. This search exposes a problem, a fault, an error in our thinking.

The structure of a text often helps us with understanding the meaning.

The Plan and its Aims

The Pleasures in Life

The Purposes of Life

The Product and its Assessments

Let's listen as the preacher explains to us what he did and what he discovered...

The Search's Parameters (v.12-18)

Solomon's life goal had been to understand all that wisdom can discover. He plans then to apply that search to the satisfactions of life. The investigation had clear parameters.

To Understand about our Time (v.12-15)

Solomon limited himself to investigating and understanding within a human, time-bound, temporal framework.

¹² I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

The key phrase is, "Under the heaven... and under the sun..." Solomon is going to apply human finite wisdom to the meaning and meaningfulness of life.

What he perceives

Frankly, he is not very hopeful. He has observed in the past how man's current lot is generally unhappy. This is what God has given. The unhappy work people must do has been given to them by God. He is once again looking back to the fall and the curse. Pain in child birth, deep troubles in marital relationships and heavy, relentless, resisted toil to provide for the family were the result of Adam's sin. But they were chosen as the consequences God imposed. As a result, he expects to find that all of man's efforts will be pointless and fruitless.

With a proverb

What he expects and anticipates is summed up in a proverb, which he quotes. He expects that all he will observe, "Is unchangeable and overwhelmingly lacking." What is the point of living in a world and time when change cannot be changed?

To Understand about Wisdom and Folly (v.16-18)

¹⁶ I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

What he perceives

Solomon is going to approach this investigation out of great personal experience. HE is insisting that what he is about to preach is not the sad, disillusioned, despair of a man at the end of life. Not at all. This was an intentional investigation carried out by a man known for his God-given wisdom who had the means and wherewithal to carry it out. He set his heart to experience, understand and explain what wisdom really is and what madness and folly really are.

Paradoxically, he expects that this pursuit will itself be like chasing the wind. He will appear the fool as he stands in the courtyard of his life waving his arms and clinching his fists to grasp the fog and vapor of human wisdom, humor and folly. The word "madness" here refers to the lunacy, incongruity, oddness that makes things funny. You could almost use the word, "comedy".

With a proverb

What he expects and anticipates is expressed in a proverb, "Ever increasing wisdom and knowledge bring vexation and sorrow." Why is this true? Because in this age, we learn (knowledge) and understand (wisdom) more and more and more with the effect that we are ever more frustrated and discouraged by the tragic futility of it all.

Solomon then is setting out on a journey. But his expectations as to what he will find and what he will see will color all of his results.

The Search in Pleasure (2:1-11)

Where would you begin to find the true meaningfulness of life?

¹ I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

The Expected Problems (v.1-2)

I love his self-talk here. It is almost as though he is trying to talk himself into enjoying the pleasures that he is sure will not please him in the long run. But he is going to do it anyway. In other words, it seems here that Solomon goes into it with his conclusion predetermined. He says, "I made myself do these things in spite of the fact I knew they were empty and meaningless." What do you think he will find? Exactly what he was expecting.

The Great Pursuits (v.3-11)

The great pursuits are here. There is some discussion about how many of these there are. But most of us can recognize these as common to our lot as well.

Wine (v.3)

He is, as we should be too, especially careful with wine, with alcoholic beverages. He seeks to cheer his body but not too much. It is wise to be sober; drunkenness is a great folly. I think we could include food in this category as well. I know many Christians do not drink at all; that is fine. But for those of us who do, we must pay close attention to Solomon's freedom and caution.

There is a pleasure in the food and drink under the sun. But there is also a kind of food and drink in God that satisfies. At one great feast, Jesus stands up and announces, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). As one writer said, "The Preacher wants us to know that neither the connoisseur nor the drunkard can find true gain in the glass." (Eswine, p. Kindle)

Homes (v.4-7a)

Solomon was enormously rich. Both the Bible and history tell us so. With his great wealth he was able to expend it on vast estates. Palatial homes, elegant, expensive yards, ponds, swimming pools, gardens, groves. He surrounded himself with slaves

and servants to cater to the needs and wants of guest and king. The desire to establish a Garden of Eden for ourselves is a deep inner desire. Having a lovely home, great yard and maybe next year, something a little bigger, better, grander. Taking pleasure in our homes and families is not sinful. But you must not set your heart on it and get your identity from it. It is going to crumble. It is going fall. There is coming an End.

Possessions (v.7b- 8a)

It is a great thing to be a wealthy king.

⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.

He could gather and store and enjoy. He had more possessions than anyone, which is often the point. Our constant scrabbling for more is often a desire to have more than someone else. The pleasure of great possessions often is in being sure that others know about it. Are great possessions sinful? Is there some sort of greater righteousness in being poor? No, it is not the thing itself... it is how you think about the thing.

But then, what is going to happen to all that wealth? What about your bank account? How quickly can it disappear? We put all our belongings in a container to go to and then back from Germany. Everything we owned – a single wave sweeping over the ship carrying all our possessions could have destroyed it all. No amount of insurance can replace the irreplaceable. Jesus told us not to pile up where there is rust and decay. Instead, pile up in heaven. Only there is it truly... safe.

Sex (v.8b)

Solomon investigated the pleasures of sex. Multiplying concubines was not just a head count. He investigated the “delight of man.” Now look, many Christians are uncomfortable talking about this subject. And we should be discreet. But sex is one of the pleasures of life (stop snickering, teenagers!). As an expression of love and oneness in marriage is a great gift from God.

But it also is filled with many temptations and many troubles. The Bible has much to say about it that is beyond the scope of the Preacher’s words from this text. Suffice it to say that we must think of sex in the context of marriage as a good and wonderful thing. It is one of the pleasures God gave and commended to us.

Position (v.9)

Solomon investigated and evaluated the pleasures of promotion. He thought about what it meant to not only be a king, but a really great king. As he grew in kingly stature, his wisdom did not leave. His wisdom expanded to fill the exalted position he held. We can recoil at that as being, well, proudful. No, we should not boast sinfully. But a wise man, thinking about power and position, saw pleasure in it.

Anything desired (v.10a)

At the end of the day, he could have and apparently did have, whatever he wanted. He was like the amazingly rich people today who can and do have everything they want. They set the mind on something, they desire something, they procure it. This is materialism at its under-the-sun best.

The Ultimate Conclusion (v.10b - 11)

While he was involved in all these things, he enjoyed it. The pleasure was real, good and in the moment.

But then he thought about it and realized that the work was empty because nothing is ultimately gained. There may be pleasure in the moment. But there is nothing permanent about any of those things that brought him pleasure.

You can hear the struggle, can't you? As one writer put it, "...the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is not the prodigal son that Jesus teaches us about (Luke 15:11-32). Though they both will come to similar conclusions, their motives and purposes are distinct. The prodigal gorges on pleasures because he believes that this is his right. He sells what belongs to him in order to get women or drink or friends for happiness. The Preacher, in contrast, seems to doubt whether this interior hole in his life can find anything to fill it. By wisdom he tests his theory and weathers the truth of it. The prodigal consumes what is under the sun. The Preacher contends with it." (Eswine, p. Kindle)

The Search for Meaning (v.12 -23)

If the pleasures of life cannot ultimately satisfy, what about the purpose of life? Can we find meaning and purpose in this life that yields a sense of satisfaction and well-being?

In the Life of Wisdom (v.12-17)

He starts with what he knows well, that is. A life of wisdom. What he may have in mind here are the intellectual pursuits, the life of the mind.

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

The Truth Statement (v.12-14a)

In all of his experience, Solomon has one absolute truth. Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. Wisdom is better than folly Light is better than darkness. Smart is better than stupid. Yet, how many people consciously choose the dark, the foolish, the stupid?

Once again, we are given a proverb to reflect on. Solomon says, "The wise see/ but fools walk in darkness" So the wise see because they have eyes. But the fool, even with eyes, walks in darkness.

The Obvious Problems (v.14b-16)

Ah, but the problem is obvious. The same fate befalls both the wise and fools. All will die. Both the wise and the fool will return to the dust. Both will end in the grave. The fool's end seems right. But why should the wise end like this too? Even the perfect, sinless man, wise beyond all measures, died.

Tragically, there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools. Oh, we might write about them. We might record their history. Some men's wisdom earns some place in history. But so what? Just like the fool, every one of them now, including that wise Preacher, is dead.

The Inevitable Conclusion (v.17)

Solomon's great conclusion? I hated life. That is brutal. Why would he with all the pleasures and power and possessions and wisdom, hate life? Because he says that all is vanity, all is empty, passing, useless. So in all his wisdom, in his carefully worked out investigation, Solomon arrives at, well, a foolish and sinful conclusion. I hate life...

In the Life of Work (v.18-23)

But maybe there is another possibly lasting and satisfying thing...

The Preacher now turns to where many gain their identity, their significance and their satisfaction. Will your life's work bring you lasting joy?

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that 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 be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Now, let me pause here and remind you that Solomon is not merely focusing on "vocation". He is highlighting all that we toil in and work for. This may be job, but it also involves school, home and ministry.

The Sad Reality (v.18-19)

He hated his life. Now he hates his toil under the sun. He reflects on the work that brought him all his gain and hates it. Why? Do we sometimes resonate with this?

As it relates to my possessions. I must leave my possessions to those coming after me.

As it relates to my posterity. I don't know whether they will be wise or foolish.

What is the conclusion: this also is empty and temporary. This has no lasting value or worth. The sad reality is that when I leave this world, I leave my stuff... to... well, you know.

The Sad Result (v.20-23)

What is the sad result? He gave up his heart to despair concerning his toil. Despair is a strong word. How does one go on with work when there is no apparent purpose, no lasting value? Why is there despair? Because all he had worked so hard for, he must leave for another to enjoy.

What is the conclusion? Humans gain nothing from all their toil. Their days are full of pain. At night their minds do not rest. The harder they work, the more they have, the less peace and secure they feel. This also is vain, empty, useless.

While this may be brutally real, is it the right way to respond? Even though there will be a sure and certain end to you and all you labor for, should we hate our lives and hate our work? That's a really good question...

The Search's Product (v.24-26)

What did the investigation produce? What did he discover? How do we think about this?

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. ***This also is vanity and a striving after wind.***

Enjoying Life is Good (v.24-25)

There is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our toil. In other words, there is a different way to think about the tragic reality. Just because everything comes to an end is no reason to despair, to hate life, to hate our work.

Why? Because all that is good and enjoyable in life is from the hand of God. For the first time Solomon evaluates what he has experienced in the light of God. We can enjoy these things, not because they are valuable, lasting, permanent in and of themselves. We can enjoy them as God's good gifts. The mundane and the magnificent of life and living are all from the hand of God.

In a sudden and surprising reversal, the shining wisdom of a man under the sun breaks forth. The despair, the futility, the hate for life all comes because we are evaluating them apart from God. None of what Solomon has investigated were sinful in and of themselves (Ok, let's not argue about concubinage). But if we are pursuing them in the hope of lasting pleasure and limitless value, we will fail. Without God, without seeing all this through His eyes, we cannot eat and have enjoyment.

The second great insight is that God gives wisdom and joy to those who please Him. So there is pleasure in the world under the sun. But it is the ashes after a fire. But when we know that it is from God and is pleasing to God, the fire is good, great and maybe even at times, glorious. The ashes are as sure as the fire. But God has changed the way we think about it.

Ah what a moment to discover, to really understand. To the sinner God gives the work of gathering. But God only gives the fruit to those who please him.

Enjoying Life is Fleeting (v.26)

But never forget, enjoying life is also fleeting. It is chasing after wind. It is a dainty, lovely, beautiful, fragile balloon. And because it is God's gift and because we please Him, that it will fade and fail does not lead to despair or hatred. It is the factoring of the End into each passing moment.

Reflect and Respond

Towards the New Testament

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19–21)

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. (John 6:27)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' " Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

What is all this about?

God created the world and a paradise called the Garden of Eden. This was man's first place.

Man sinned and the world was cursed and would never be Eden until the End.

God had designed the world for the curse, for finite, fallen humans. That is the world we now live in.

We tend to want Eden recovered now. So we go about our pleasures, not to enjoy God, but recreate what was lost. Many are the dreams of Utopian paradises.

But Eden is gone. No amount of trying will make it again. So enjoy what God has given you in a way that pleases Him while living in this now, this fallenness, this futility.

We are brought to a difficult truth about God. This truth is where many of you struggle. God does not provide in His redemptive work an escape from the world in which we live.

Two final words from a wise traveler and writer under the sun.

In Jesus, the true Solomon and Son of David, we learn as his people to become the tour guides and mall maps of the world. "Here is where you are," we say by grace to those around us. "Here is what things once were like and here is what it is like in the world now and here is the language you need to wisely get through it with God." This is what we were meant for. Wherever "there" is, we have God-given language for it. It is a voice and a language that we never expected God to give us. But he did. (Eswine, p. Kindle)

No matter how called or wise he is, no matter how helpful and necessary his mentoring will prove to be for us, even a man of God still squints and sweats beneath the sun. To use even a man of God to accrue gain under the sun is a vanity. After all, Solomon died. So will we. Even the very wise cannot fix the world. (Eswine, p. Kindle)

Only a death and resurrection will.