

The 3 Paths of Life

The Secret to Life - Ecclesiastes

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

This morning I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Ecclesiastes, which may be one of the most needed books of the Bible for our lives, but often one of the most neglected. If you're not familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes, it's really easy to find. You just open your Bible to the middle. It typically falls into the book of Psalms. You go a few pages to the right, make your way through Proverbs, and you'll end up in the book known as Ecclesiastes and today as we begin a journey through this very needed book in our lives, one of the things we're gonna do is we're gonna start in chapter 1 but we're gonna close in chapter 12 because it is those closing verses that you just saw in that video that truly sum up the matter what is the conclusion of all things, fear God and keep his commandments.

You and I today, as we embark on this journey, find ourselves in a somewhat regular season of our culture. This is a season where almost every single one of us, if not all of us, has somebody that we care for deeply, a child, grandchild, cousin, nephew, neighbor, friend, whomever it may be, that will walk across a stage at a ceremony that we refer to as graduation. This is the season of high school graduations, college graduations, graduate school graduations. In fact, we've even become a culture, we graduate kindergartners. I mean, that's just kind of who we are. We love to celebrate those who've accomplished the goals that have been set out before them.

Now, not so much at the elementary school level, but once you get into high school and college, those respective academic institutions, they put a lot of thought and energy and at times a lot of money into who will be the commencement speaker. You think about that for a moment. When we go to a graduation ceremony, and I've been to many as I'm sure many of you have as well, they're always introduced with a litany, or shall I say, a resume of accomplishments, often successful in the world of business or philanthropy, those that have made changes to our world for the betterment of those that will exit that institution. What if today, what if we on this graduation season, what if we could have somebody stand before us that is literally head and shoulders above every commencement speaker we've ever heard? What if there was a man that was wiser than all the rest? What if there was an individual who accumulated more wealth than the tycoons of our ages combined? What if there was a person who could literally stand before you and say whatever you're dreaming, whatever you're thinking, whatever you aspire for, I've not only embraced it,

I've lived it, and I'm here to tell you what I found on the other side. There does exist such a man. His name was Solomon. He was the descendant, the child of a man known as King David, noted for his wisdom of the ages, his wealth beyond comprehension. The story of Ecclesiastes is the story of a man who lived his entire life trying to find something more satisfying than God himself and what does he draw as a conclusion? There is only one conclusion: fear God and keep his commandments.

Today I want to begin the journey in chapter 1 because he begins this somewhat journal of his life by expressing the three paths that every one of us at some point will navigate, journey or end up on. He basically says in verse 16 and 17, we'll read them in just a moment, that there are three paths to life: there is the path of wisdom, there is the path of madness, and there is the path of folly. Now remember this is the wisest man in the world who has seen it all saying this is basically what life sums down to. Now we teach, speak of wisdom, madness and folly, I'm gonna speak a little Southernese this morning, I'm gonna put it in our language: you can either be running with God, you can be running from God or you can just be running and you don't have a clue where you're headed. That's essentially what Solomon boils down this pursuit of life that we're on.

Beginning in verse 16 he says,

16 I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. 17 And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

And though he lists out here wisdom and madness and folly, obviously he's going to focus on a life of wisdom, but as you begin chapter 1 you discover that he actually introduces the concept or the idea of madness first. Now what is madness? Madness by strict definition is a life that is marked by senselessness that more often than not leads to destruction; in other words, living a life and making decisions that are completely contrary to God. That is what a senseless life is. You actually subscribe and you believe that you know better or know more than God himself does.

Now here's the struggle with madness, it ends up revealing or manifesting itself in two overarching qualities, there is an ignorance and there is an arrogance. Now when we talk about the ignorance, there is that which is not known but perceived to be known. Now I want you to notice what it says in verse 2 of chapter 1, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" Some of your Bibles will read meaningless, meaningless, emptiness, emptiness. Essentially, here's what Solomon's doing, he's on the backside of life, he is in his latter years, he's reflecting on all of the beliefs, all the constructs, and all the pursuits of the life that he lived that were against and contrary to God and what does he say about them? They're meaningless. Here's the struggle with the madness, here's the struggle with running from God, is we actually believe the lie that we're headed the right direction and we know what we're doing.

One of the verses that has been very endeared in my life in recent days, years, and shall I say a little over a decade is Proverbs chapter 16 verse 31. You may not be familiar with it, but here's what it says. It says gray hair is God's crown upon a man. In other words, gray hair is proof you live through the madness of your life. But here's the struggle with madness. Oftentimes when we live a life of senselessness, when we live a life of destruction, it is running from God that we actually believe that we will gain and receive the pursuit and the goal that we ascribe and what it is, is a maddening, senseless thought.

Now some of you may or may not be familiar with this illustration, but we live in a culture today where we're actually able to enhance, or allow me to say, disguise the color of our hair. Some people refer to it as a miracle in a bottle. But that being said, there's a lot of us who go and take the gray hairs and we pay well to have somebody hide them, disguise them, so that nobody can see them. But you may or may not know this, did you know there's actually a trend among young people today, twenty-somethings and even into their thirties, individuals with beautiful, long, flowing, dark hair that are purposefully having gray streaks put in it. Now those of us who earned it are thinking that they're nuts because you know how you get gray hair? By doing stupid, senseless stuff. That's really what happens. But think about that for just a moment. Somebody, and I know it's the fashion trend, but somebody who would purposely gray their hair wants you to think they know more than they actually do. They want you to believe that they have gained experience out of a bottle not of life, and that is the ignorance of madness.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. You actually believe, though you're running from God, you know what you're doing. Here's the struggle, that ignorance actually leads to arrogance. Notice verse 4, "One generation passes away, another generation comes, but the earth abides forever." The end of verse 8, it says, "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear is filled with hearing." The arrogance is they're running from God, the madness says that the life I'm living, the beliefs I'm holding, that which I desire, actually is so monumental that they're going to be talking about me not just for years to come, but for generations. What's it say in, verse 4? One generation comes and it passes, but the earth abides forever. How many well-meaning philanthropists have donated incredible sums of resources to building projects, academic endeavors, until 75, 100 years later, see those buildings with their own names come crumbling down? Not even a gift of such financial magnitude can last beyond a couple generations.

But the issue of madness, this self-deception of running from God and doing and experiencing anything except God leads to an unbelievable destructive arrogance. Allow me to illustrate. When I was applying for graduate school, I not only had to give them the transcript of my undergraduate, but back in those days, for whatever reason, they wanted the transcript from my high school. Now here was the problem. For those of us who have the crown of glory on our head, you'll understand. They didn't have the internet back then. They didn't have email that was readily available. And if you needed to provide a transcript, young people, we did something revolutionary. We showed up in person, requested it, and then put it in the mail. I know it's unfathomable, but that's what we did. So here's what I did. I showed up to the high school that I'd graduated from. This was a

place that I'd given four years of my life to. It was a school district that I'd spent the entirety of my life in and it had been about three and a half, four years since I'd darkened the doors, but good night, this is where I grew up. This was a second home to me. So I did what everybody would have done in my place. I walked in the office. I met some young lady that was some student volunteer. I introduced myself and I said what I was there for, I was there to receive a transcript that I had called for in advance. She said, oh, we remember the phone call. We've already got it ready. Thank you, thank you. In order to receive it, we're going to need your ID. Now here's the problem. I left my wallet in the car. I didn't have my... This is my high school. I should not have to produce an ID. Surely you know who I am. She'd had no clue who I was.

So we went back and forth and we bantered for a while and I started noticing something. I didn't recognize anybody. Nobody in that office had been there just three years prior and so I got a little arrogant. Don't be shocked, it happens, because to this young lady at the counter, to her left and to my right, there was a very large plaque and on that plaque stood all the names and all the years that certain individuals had won what they deemed a pretty prestigious award. Here's the great news. My name was on that plaque. And so I called her attention to the wall. I said, "Ma'am." I said, "Do you see this plaque? Do you see that name? It matches the name, that's me." I'm not making this up. She goes, "I'm sorry, I cannot help you." All of a sudden, a new administrator walked in. I didn't know who he was. I'd never laid eyes on him before. He heard the disagreement. I explained my case and that wonderful story concluded with me going to the parking lot and getting my driver's license and proving who I was. Isn't it amazing, the life of madness says, I will leave a mark on society they'll never forget, the problem is all it takes is about three and a half years and nobody remembers who you are. See, that's what happens when you run from God. You think so much of yourself and yet you realize how little you truly are.

Ah, but there's a second life, it's the life of folly. It's the life of foolishness. And this picks up in verse 9. Now let me define for you folly. Folly is a life that is marked by foolishness with a lack of understanding. Now let me illustrate that definition in terms we're pretty familiar with. When it comes to high school and even the collegiate level, we take those classes of students and we tend to categorize them in four respective classifications. You have freshmen, you have sophomores, you have juniors, and you have seniors. Now some seniors get senioritis when they're juniors, but nonetheless, that's the four that we have. Now, the reason I call your attention to that is very few people actually know what the word sophomore means. Sophomore. Now think about this. They've got one year under their belt, they're pretty confident, they know what they're doing. You know the word sophomore means a wise fool? That's all it means. It means you think you know what you're doing but you don't have a clue. A life of folly is marked by an individual who is just running with everything they've got, but they don't have a clue where they're going. They don't really have any understanding. They're just putting all their passion, all their zeal. They're not necessarily running from God, they're just exhausting themselves and quote unquote running.

Now a life of folly also has ignorance. Notice what it says in verse 9, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and

there is no new thing under the sun." A life marked by folly actually believes that they can, if they run hard enough and they run fast enough and they run far enough, they will discover something about life that nobody else has experienced. Now remember, this is Solomon. This is a man who ran against God. This is a man who ran indiscriminately. And he said, "You know what the problem is? You can search and you can seek out some new thing and what you're going to discover is this: everything you find is something that's already happened. We just repackage it and we rename it."

This isn't an issue that's relegated to Solomon's days. Obviously, it's prevalent today. But it was even relevant in the days of the New Testament. You think about the book of Acts. The gospel is going forth into all the world. In fact, in chapter 17, the book of Acts, it says the whole world has been turned upside down. Then the Apostle Paul, he stumbles on a group of academicians, a group of philosophers, a group of thinkers. You know what he accuses them of? He says all you do is spend your entire life trying to find some new thing. Can I tell you what a life marked by folly is? Let's find a new way to identify. Let's find a new way to define institutions that have been around for thousands of years. Let's find a new way. For those of you that have the crown of glory on your head, think back to the Rolling Stones. "I can't get no satisfaction. But I tried, and I tried and I tried." And in today's world, we define ourselves, we describe ourselves, we identify ourselves as something that is new, hoping somehow we can stumble on something that nobody else has ever found. Yet what do we discover? Even the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 19, he says, "Do you not know that from the beginning, they were male, they were female, and they joined in marriage, and a man and a woman left their respective families and they cleaved to one another and they became one in flesh." And that is just one issue and one idea that we're trying to find some new way of defining and describing.

It is the pursuit of anything that will give us the pleasure that only the Lord can promise but, you know, it leads to an arrogance too. Notice what it says all the way down in verse 15. He says, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." I've got news for each and every one of us: just because you want it, to be desired, to be and feel like it should does not mean it is. In other words, you may want 2 plus 2 to equal 5, the problem is it equals 4. You cannot make that which is straight crooked. You cannot make that which is crooked straight.

See the Apostle Paul before he was Paul was Saul of Tarsus. One day he found his way on the road to Damascus. He had permission by the government to eliminate, to eradicate those that claimed the name of Jesus, those that believed that Jesus was the Savior and had risen from the grave. He's on that road and the Bible famously tells us in Acts chapter 9 that he falls down at the sight of a light brighter than he'd ever seen, and a voice spoke to him. The voice was Jesus himself. And I love the statement that Jesus makes to Paul. It may sound a little old fashioned, but I'll bring it contemporary. He says, "Paul, Saul, why do you kick against the pricks?" That's just an old way of saying, "Why do you try to straighten something that's crooked? Why are you trying to make something crooked that is straight? Do you not understand? You cannot win this fight. No matter how fast you run, how far you run, how passionately you run, you are not going to find in your running anything that can compare to the one who's speaking to you out of the clouds right now."

See, when it comes to life, there's a whole lot of people, you're running from God. You don't want a thing to do with him. You're trying to find anything that is contrary to him. There's a whole host of people, you're just running. You just want something to fill the void. You want something to fill you. You just want anything to give you the desires of your heart. Ah, but then there's the last one, wisdom. Wisdom by definition means rendering a decision or having a course of action, listen to this revolutionary thought, according to truth. In other words, a life of wisdom says that my feelings are secondary, perspectives are secondary, but what is discovered to be truth is primary.

Now, I want you to notice what it says in verse 18 of this chapter. It says, "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." Let me tell you what the Bible is saying. Today, if you walk out of this place and say, "Man, I don't want to live a life of madness. I don't want to live a life of folly. I want a life marked by wisdom, decisions that are based on truth," I will make you a biblically founded promise, you will have grief and sorrow. You say, "Why will I have grief and sorrow? Isn't this what life is supposed to be?" You know why grief and sorrow? Because you will find yourself in the statistical minority because we live in a culture that is saturated with folly and madness, and if you subscribe to what is true, if you actually subscribe to what is true in the word of God, you're going to find yourself in a statistical minority, and you know what you're going to do? You're not just going to grieve over your position, you're going to grieve on others' position. Grieving for that family member or friend who cannot see the truth right there in front of their eyes. Grieving for that co-worker that is just running as fast as they can away from God. Or that friend who spends so much time running and doesn't have a clue where they're headed.

How does wisdom, quote, flesh out in our life? This is where chapter 12 comes into play. I want to encourage you to turn to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes. I want to kind of sum up the matter. See, wisdom or a life that's marked by truth is not a life of ignorance. In fact, it's a life of intelligence. Now, intelligence is subscribing to that which is proven and that which is true. And I know this may be, quote, graduation Sunday on our campus, but I want you to hear me very clearly: intelligence and education are not synonyms. I can say what I'm about to say because I have one, some of the most foolish and ignorant people I know have a PhD, and some of the smartest people I know never even stepped foot on a college campus. Intelligence is not a synonym of education yet Solomon possessed both.

So what did he say here in verse 13 of chapter 12? "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Here's what Solomon is saying: if you want to live a life of wisdom, if you want to live a life of intelligence, ignore the loudest voices, ignore the most frequent voices, and only listen to the voice that is true. Fear God and keep his commandments. What a statement of intelligence. In other words, the Bible says that we all are like sheep, we've gone astray. All of our works are like filthy rags. We've all sinned and rebelled against God. You may not like what it says, it may not make you feel good about yourself, but an intelligent, wise person says it is true about me. In fact, in a world of a multiplicity of

ideas, the construct of Jesus Christ being exclusive, the way, the truth, the life, that nobody comes to the Father but by him, you can get in dialogues, discussions, and debates, but a wise, intelligent person says, "Doesn't matter how I feel or what I think, is it true?" Well, the very fact that he's the one grave that's been emptied, I would place my eternity on it.

Fear God and keep his commandments, which leads not to arrogance, but to humility. Notice verse 14, "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." It doesn't matter where your stage or age of life is today, you may have gray hair because of experience and a host of poor decisions, or you may have gotten it out of a \$13.99 bottle. I don't know where you got it. But nonetheless, here's what the Bible's saying, that at the end of this mortal life, whatever that looks like and however many years the Lord gives you, you are going to stand before God and you're going to give an account of where you stand and what you believe about him. And you know what the Bible says in the book of Philippians chapter 2? It says that when we are in the presence of God, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

I want to close today with taking us to the last event, at least on our human calendar, it's the end of the book of Revelation. It's right before what we know as eternity begins. The Lord Jesus is on his throne. Did you know that at that event, according to Revelation 20, everybody is humbled, everybody is bowing, and everybody is professing, however, there are two different groups: there is a group that is behind him awaiting heaven and everlasting life, and there's a group before him that is awaiting the second death in the lake of fire. You know what the difference is? Not that they confessed, but when they confessed. See, everybody's going to do it. The problem is, when you get to that moment in Revelation 20, it's just a little bit too late.

See, today, you can either be running from God, you can just be running, or you can be running with God but every one of those paths ends up at the throne of God, and what you've believed and what you've declared and what you profess makes an eternity of difference. And when it comes to wisdom, let me close with this, eternity is awfully long to be wrong.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. Today as we gather physically on this campus, virtually by way of television, the internet, the radio, you might be that individual right now that the Spirit of God took the word of God and did a surgical procedure in your life and in your heart and maybe today, as we read these words, as we see the life of one who's lived everything we aspire and desire for, maybe today's that day we realize we're on the wrong path. Maybe today you're on the path of madness. Maybe you're doing everything you can to run from God. Maybe today you say, "Well, pastor, I'm just running, I just don't know where I'm headed." Well, today may it be a day of wisdom, a day marked by intelligence and humility. The Bible says in Romans chapter 10 verse 13, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The Bible doesn't say whoever joins a church, whoever gets baptized, whoever does this, whoever does that. It says no, no, if you want to know that you know that you know that you're in the right place, not just now but for all eternity, you call on the name of Jesus. What does that

mean? Essentially means that you admit you've got a sin problem that Jesus solved with his death and resurrection and you're staking your everything on it. Maybe today's the day that you call on the name of the Lord. You don't have to do so out loud. You don't have to say the words I would say. You don't have to read a script. This is a heart's cry, but maybe, just maybe today, you're that person, you're on the wrong path and you want to be on the right path. Maybe today your heart's cry would go a little something like this. "God, today I realize I'm a sinner. I've got a sin problem. God, I've been places I should have never been. I've participated in things I should have never been a part of. And God, you alone know the words that have come out of my mouth, the thoughts that have been in my head. And Lord, your Bible makes it very clear, the wages, the result of my sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So God, today I believe, I've got a sin problem only Jesus can solve. So God, I want you to know I do believe, I believe Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. God, I believe he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, today I believe that when he allowed himself to be nailed to his cross, he was bearing the pain, the punishment, and rightfully what I deserve. God, I also believe that three days later when he rose from the grave he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the struggles and the problems of life but I know I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

Today with our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who jumped off the wrong path onto the right path. We'd love to celebrate with you. We'd love to pray with you, pray over you. In just a moment, I'm going to pray. We're going to stand and sing together and wherever you are I just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. I'll be here. We'll have others as well. We want to celebrate what God's doing in your life. Or maybe today you say, "Pastor, I took care of that years ago but I saw that young man walk through those baptismal waters. I've made excuses for years but maybe today's the day I need to talk about that." We would love to have that conversation. Or maybe today, like each and every time we gather, you're that person, that family that says, "You know what, this is our home, spiritually speaking. We want to know what does that look like." Or maybe today you say, "You know what, it's just, I'm walking through a rough season. My strength is gone. I'm exhausted. I can barely lift my head." You just need somebody to pray with you, pray for you. We want you to know, whatever the decision, whatever the struggle, we just want to be a part of what God's doing in your life.

Lord Jesus, thank you. Thank you that on a day that we come to naturally celebrate, celebrate those whom we would not be here without, celebrate those that have accomplished a task and a goal that was set before them, that, Lord, we can ultimately celebrate that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Lord, I pray irrespectively of whatever the counter calls this day, that today might be a day that we call our birthday, our spiritual birthday, the day that we repented of our sin and called upon Jesus to save us. Lord, whatever the decision might be, may we yield to you this day. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.