

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15; 2:18-26 – WHAT’S THE USE? The Wise Person Seeks To Find Meaning In Life From God.

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People throughout history have tried to take their wealth with them when they died. Items placed around mummies and in caskets point to that effort. The great equalizer in life is death, regardless of how much or how little one accumulates. The writer of Ecclesiastes observed that people who focus solely on work and amassing material possessions come to the end of life without any eternal gains to show for it.

In what activities do people engage in their pursuit to find meaning in life?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–2:26

The Book of Ecclesiastes consists of “the words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The only king who was a descendant of David and ruled in Jerusalem over all of Israel was Solomon. Verses 2-3 indicate the theme of the book. In Hebrew, the word translated “meaningless” means “vapor” or “breath.” From this the word came to mean “temporary,” “fleeting,” “futile,” “inconsequential,” or even “absurd.” The phrase, “under the sun,” was Solomon’s way of referring to life on earth. It is here the Teacher asked the often repeated key question of the book: “What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?” The answer is futility.

The generations of humanity come and go, but they, along with their achievements, are forgotten. While there are human inventions, reconstructions, and novel ideas, nothing is able to add any lasting meaning or value to what God already has created. Humanity can add nothing intrinsically new to what He has done. Therefore, the search for meaning in life will not come through something as transitory as human achievement (1:3-11).

With this in mind, the Teacher delved into numerous pursuits he undertook in the search for life’s meaning. He tried education and intellectual endeavors but discovered that trying to understand the meaning of life is too perplexing for even the most educated and greatest of human intellects. In the end, it is a bewildering puzzle (1:12-18). Solomon found that even the wisdom one may gain in life is of no real ultimate value. In the end, both the wise and foolish share the same fate—death (2:12-17).

Next, he turned his attention to pleasure and the accumulation of possessions. He discovered the “delights of a man’s heart” were in the end a disappointment (2:8). Moreover, when one dies, it is likely that those who inherit these possessions will squander them, so all the work was for nothing. It is best to go through life being content with what one has (2:18-26). All of this indicates the answer to life’s meaning is outside of human achievement. It should lead humanity to look to God who provides the answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?” The answer is in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-15 and 2:18-26, highlighting words or phrases that express frustration. How does the futility of human achievements reveal one's need for God?

SOLOMON ASKS FOR WISDOM

1 KINGS 3:5-14 At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." 6 Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. 7 "Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. 8 Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. 9 So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" 10 The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. 11 So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, 12 I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. 13 Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. 14 And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."

EXPLORE THE TEXT

LIMITED PERSPECTIVE (ECCL. 1:12-15)

V. 12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. V. 13 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! V. 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. V. 15 What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

VERSES 12-15

As already noted, the writer indicated he was a "son of David" and had been king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:1,12). This points to Solomon. As king, Solomon was known for his great wealth and building projects, which included the temple and his palace in Jerusalem. Solomon was also renowned for his wisdom. He had both the means and the mind to provide a unique, insightful perspective on life. It is best to think of Ecclesiastes as Solomon's musings and reflections on what he had learned in life now that he was approaching its end.

The phrase I applied my heart is literally "I set my heart." This idiom represents one's thinking, will, and devotion. The Teacher indicated he determined to devote his whole self—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—to this task. To study means to get to the root of the matter, and explore means to thoroughly investigate the matter from a variety of approaches. The Teacher was analytical, meticulous, and thorough in his pursuit of understanding the meaning and significance of life.

The Teacher discovered that his endeavor was a heavy burden. Why? Because he discovered that, in contrast to the widely held belief that knowledge leads to satisfaction in life, the pursuit of knowledge

fails to give lasting fulfillment. It is a never-ending quest and a hopeless task. It will always be fruitless until one realizes God is the Source of wisdom as well as the Goal of wisdom. True wisdom comes from God and always leads to God. Therefore, the wisdom of man will never satisfy. Because we were created in the image of God, we sense there is something beyond us, and so we search. However, it is a miserable task when we look to ourselves and fail to look to God for the solution.

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to gain insight into a word.

Read the entry about “vain,” “vanity,” or “futility” in a Bible dictionary. Examine some of the Bible passages included. How does the way vain or vanity is used outside of Ecclesiastes give you deeper insight into the emotions expressed by Solomon? What modern words might you use to convey what Solomon meant when he used the word translated as vanity or futility?

The Teacher indicated he saw the various things people busy themselves with and concluded that, apart from God, humanity is doomed to a life of frustration. The pursuits of accomplishment, satisfaction, and progress end in futility. In the context, this conclusion is especially true concerning intellectual pursuits. It is like chasing the wind. One can never catch it, but even if one could, it would amount to nothing. Since the fall, when Adam and Eve sinned, all of humanity has been subjected to these futile pursuits, and our only hope is in God’s salvation. (**Rom. 8:20-21** For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.)

Solomon concluded this section with a proverb: What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. The first part means that problems—what is crooked—cannot be solved. The second part means that there is no end to a lack of information. In other words, there is not enough data to solve the problem. Intellectuals and the most educated should recognize this truth. There are anomalies in life that one cannot comprehend, and this is especially true when it comes to the most important issues in life. No matter how impressed humanity may be with its own intellectual prowess, it fades away before the inscrutableness of God.

What motivates a person to find meaning and purpose? How does that motivation work for and against a person?

INHERITANCE BLOWN? (ECCL. 2:18-21)

V. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. V. 19 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. V. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. V. 21 For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

VERSES 18-21

The Teacher has deliberated on the failures of physical pleasures and luxuries to bring meaningful satisfaction in life. He revisited the futility of attempting to achieve immortality by accumulating human wisdom or accomplishing great feats (2:1-17). Now he turned his attention to the question, "What will happen to all my wealth and accomplishments when I die?" In the preceding verses he acknowledged that everyone will die. Now, he considered what happens after that. He was appalled when he recognized the truth that someday he would die and lose everything he had worked to attain. He realized everything he had accomplished by his hard work would go to someone else.

This is what happens when one views work as a means of self-gratification. For such individuals, their work literally ends up at a dead end. One of Solomon's proverbs, **Proverbs 16:3**, states: "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans." The Hebrew word translated activities refers to all the various things people set out to accomplish in life, including their work. The Hebrew word translated establish means "to be made stable, durable, and lasting." The promise of this proverb stands in stark contrast to what happens to those who live and work for themselves instead of for the Lord. Their accomplishments are temporary and ultimately meaningless. When people commit their activities to the Lord, not only do they honor Him but they store up for themselves eternal "treasures in heaven" (**Matt. 6:20** But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal).

To make matters worse, the Teacher considered who might inherit everything he had accumulated. It occurred to him that all his hard work and all he had attained would come to nothing. His children may squander it. Though Solomon made no direct reference to his son, Rehoboam became an apt illustration of Solomon's point (**1 Kings 11:41–12:24**). With time, legacies will be forgotten and others will spend what they have inherited in whatever ways they choose. Concerning one's labor, it is best to heed Paul's instruction to the believers in Colossae concerning work: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (**Col. 3:23-24**).

Why are people prone to focus solely on work and the amassing of material possessions in their lives without any regard for God?

After all his investigation into the human pursuit for meaning and satisfaction in life, the Teacher became disillusioned with it all. He experienced human wisdom and pleasure and discovered they had nothing meaningful and lasting to offer. Every human attainment will be forgotten, lost, and passed on to someone else. The person who lives by the philosophy, "He who dies with the most toys wins," will ultimately have lived for nothing. Therefore, the Teacher no longer would be deluded by the notion that hard work and the accumulation of wealth validates one's life. There is more to life than that.

The Teacher then determined that not only is working hard and accumulating possessions a futile task, but it is also an injustice. One can spend a lifetime working to think properly concerning an endeavor, learn all the pertinent information, develop the expert skills needed to be successful, then lose everything to someone else who did nothing to earn it. The Teacher found this all quite disturbing.

ENJOY WORK (ECCL. 2:22-26)

V. 22 What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? V. 23 All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. V. 24 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, V. 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? V. 26 To the person who pleases him, 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.

VERSES 22-23

The Teacher returned to the key question of the book first raised in the introduction (1:3). This fundamental question appears several times in the book (1:3; 2:22; 3:9; 5:16; 6:8,11). All the content in the book is connected to this question. For this reason, the reader should keep this question in mind while reading the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. The question asks, **“When people die, is there any lasting value or eternal significance to all the mental stress and strenuous work that consumed their lives, and how will these pursuits help people beyond the grave?”** This lays the groundwork for the counsel the Teacher would dispense in verse 24 and following.

Not only does all this work and worry offer no eternal value in the afterlife, but it is also a life filled with grief, sorrow, and anxious unrest every hour of every day and night. It describes a life of misery, adversity, and worry—consisting of stressful days and sleepless nights. Such is the plight of the workaholic whose life is consumed with work, thinking this is what life is all about. It is physically and emotionally draining and devoid of any eternal significance.

What are the dangers of basing our worth solely on the job or type of work we do?

VERSES 24-26

Verses 24-26 mark the climax of the first section of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher concluded that work and the fruit of one’s labor should be enjoyed as one recognizes they are gifts from God. Work originates with God, as He is a God who works. The creation account indicates God was pleased with His work of creation and blessed the man by placing him in the garden to work (**Gen. 1:31–2:3,15**). God established a pattern of working six days and resting on the seventh (**Ex. 20:8-11**). The ability to work and enjoy its fruit are gifts from God. However they are neither a means to nor the attainment of lasting value. It is not the gifts but the Giver who gives them significance. Speaking of God, the Teacher asked, **“Who can enjoy life apart from Him?”** The answer is no one.

The wise person lives a life devoted to God and thus experiences the joy of knowing God and living life as God intends it to be lived. In contrast, the foolish who live for themselves forfeit everything. All their striving in life is for nothing. Thus, it is the people of God who ultimately inherit all things. The Teacher recognized God’s sovereignty to be both gracious and just at the same time. As the great King over the whole earth, God has sovereign authority to choose an eternal inheritance for those who belong to Him.

Why should those who belong to God enjoy life more than anyone else?

KEY DOCTRINE: Stewardship

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (2 Cor. 9:8).

APPLY THE TEXT

We need God's gift of wisdom to find life's true purpose.

Focusing solely on work and amassing material possessions leads to no eternal gains.

Believers should enjoy their work, thanking God for His provisions.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your dependence on God for your life's purpose? What adjustments need to be made to increase your dependence on Him?

Review your schedule, noting the amount of time spent on work versus other activities. What does your schedule reveal about your attitude toward work and the value of work? How does your attitude coincide with what Solomon taught?

As a group, memorize Ecclesiastes 2:26. In your discussion, consider how work and being blessed with the ability to work are gifts from God. How can you use your work to honor God? [LifeWay Adults (2020). (p. 81). Explore the Bible: Adult Personal Study Guide - NIV - Summer 2021. LifeWay Press. Retrieved from <https://read.lifeway.com>]