

July 14, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 2:12-17.

1. What is a Garfunkel and how does “it” illustrate Solomon’s conclusion in this text?
2. What is wisdom (the meaning of the Hebrew word in our text)?
3. What is folly?
4. According to Solomon’s discoveries in this text, what is sadder than the fact that the end of this life is death?
5. What does light and darkness represent in this text?
6. What is the only hope for people in this futile world?

HE LIVED THE HIGH LIFE AND HATED IT
Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

Adam and Eve believed Satan’s lie that God was withholding from them something they would enjoy very much. So they trusted Satan more than God, they obeyed their desires instead of God’s Word, and they stepped over God’s boundary to get what they wanted. Indeed, they experienced something new. And very quickly they hated what they had gained.

That is the same road many others have followed. It is the same end of the road at which many others have arrived. It is the sad conclusion that is illustrated by the mythical existence called

Hollywood. When I was in High School, *California Dreaming* was not only a popular song but a popular move (or at least a desire) among my peers. It seemed like everyone wanted what the “Mamas and the Papas” were singing about—

All the leaves are brown
And the sky is grey.
I’ve been for a walk
On a winter’s day.
I’d be safe and warm
If I was in L.A.

The fact is, you might be warm in L.A., but your safety might be in question. Some of my friends actually did move to L.A. One died there. Others moved back east. The dream wasn’t what it was cracked up to be. California Dreaming-kind-of-people very often end up in destructive addictions and homelessness. It is such a serious problem that many even liberal thinkers have concluded that Los Angeles looks like a third world country. Can you say, “*hebel*”? All is vanity, a chasing of the wind, emptiness.

By the way, some of you responded as though you never heard of the “Mamas and the Papas.” How about, “Nero and the Gladiators”? Or maybe “The Marmalade”? They had about a dozen hit songs in the 60’s. Surely you remember “The Turtles” and their hit *Happy Together*? A few years ago, we hosted a funeral here. The family wanted to play a video of photo clips with background music, which is very common. I walked into the auditorium, heard the music, and said to our assistant pastor, “That sounds like Simon and Garfunkel.” To which he replied, “What is a Garfunkel?”

That is just the point. I have just related to you the names of groups and individuals who were wildly famous just two generations ago. And yet most of the people in my children’s generation never heard of them. And the people in my grandchildren’s generation assume I must be talking about some kind of dinosaurs. Solomon was dead-on again. We try to live wisely, we try to make gain, we try to do something significant, and in the end, *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 (v.16)!*

What is agonizingly sad is that most of the people alive and who have ever lived end up at that conclusion. I have wonderful

news! Life doesn't have to be lived like that. Jesus came and we have hope. Let's consider the lesson Solomon learned, and then consider the alternative to *hebel*.

Consideration.

What more can be done? The preacher considered wisdom, madness, and folly. He confessed, *So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly (v.12a)*. This statement alerts us to the fact that Solomon switched gears from investigating creativity and possessions to thinking about wisdom and foolishness.

The verb translated *to consider* speaks of a conscious decision. It means to think about, to ponder, to investigate in order to perceive. Solomon was doing a test, an experiment. The object of Solomon's investigation at this point was threefold. He considered wisdom, madness, and folly.

The Hebrew word for wisdom, the object of Solomon's investigation, is a very common Old Testament reference to human intelligence. It is skill in putting knowledge to work in real-life situations. The wise person is able to discern a problem, perceive a solution to the problem, and know how to make it work. Solomon poked and prodded that trait to see if it could explain life or give life purpose.

Solomon also considered madness. He was not thinking about embracing madness. Rather, his plan was to prove the distinction between wisdom and madness. Madness truly is a reference to insanity, a mental deficiency, or drunkenness. It is an inability to think straight or cogently. We can be pretty sure that such a mental state would not explain the meaning of life. But, because that is true, why are so many people in such a state of incoherency?

Third, Solomon considered folly. Folly is just plain foolishness. The Hebrew word is found only seven times in the Bible and all uses are in Ecclesiastes. It is the exact opposite of wisdom. The word often expresses moral deficiency or spiritual lack. It is not just lack of wisdom, but lack of character and integrity which causes a person to make bad choices.

Having prodded and poked wisdom, madness, and folly, Solomon concluded, "Who is sufficient for these things?" That is

essentially what the words of our text mean. *For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done (v.12b)*. If the king cannot figure these things out, how should we expect the commoner to have answers? That is not necessarily arrogance, but a common expectation that kings would be wiser than the run-of-the-mill populace. Even in our text Solomon concludes that kings of all people live in wisdom and gain more.

But, in the long run, what is the point of gain? So what if the wise person gains more? Yes, it is true that there is gain in wisdom but no gain in folly. In his pursuit of wisdom versus folly, the preacher discovered: *Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly (v.13a)*. This is such an obvious conclusion that it makes us wonder why folly truly is exalted in our culture. We could spend hours just thinking about all the illustrations of this reality.

Remember that folly is lack of character, integrity, and, ultimately, spiritual understanding. Everything about our society tends toward that lack. Almost the entire sphere of media and communication is bent on encouraging, exalting, recommending anything and everything that is contrary to sound Bible teaching. Movies glory in deceit, theft, lying, adultery, fornication, murder, malice, jealousy, envy. Make a list of the 75 various sins listed in the New Testament and stand astonished that those are the apparent goals and past times of our society. It is no small wonder that the great societies of the past were generally not overrun by literal enemies until they had first been weakened morally by folly.

While contrasting wisdom against folly, Solomon concluded that it is the same as the contrast between light and darkness. He decided that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly *as there is more gain in light than in darkness (v.13b)*.

Light is a picture of wisdom as darkness is a picture of folly. Scripture uses this contrast frequently. In the beginning, darkness was everywhere until God spoke light into existence. The light dispels the darkness. The light reveals what is hidden in darkness. Darkness typifies sin and that which is opposed to God's character. Light typifies God's truth and righteousness.

Obviously then there is more to gain in light. In a literal sense, walking around in darkness is eventually going to result in pain and

loss. In a figurative sense, whatever is worth gaining is going to be found in a context of God's character and righteousness.

From a purely pragmatic, earthly perspective, the company that exercises the wisdom found in God's righteousness will out gain the company that resorts to sinful practices typified by folly and darkness. Apart from the knowledge that Satan hates God and seeks to undo His work, we would be shocked to observe people and movements in America that are trying their hardest to undo, to eliminate, to cast off laws and practices that reflect God's principles and that have resulted in the prosperity of America. Of course Satan is going to promote darkness, moral and spiritual depravity, in short folly! And there is still more to gain in the light of wisdom than in the darkness of foolishness.

Therefore, Solomon would say, "Keep your eyes in your head." *The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness (v.14a)*. This enigmatic statement means that the wise person is observing, paying attention, seeing foolishness to avoid, and opportunity to buy up. The fool is like a person living with a blindfold. The wise person embraces what is sensible and logical. The fool embraces what feels good.

That is all true and well and good. The disheartening reality is that both the wise and the foolish arrive at the same end. *And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them (v. 14b)*. Wisdom is much to be encouraged instead of foolishness. Gain is found with wisdom. But in the end, both the wise person who gained and the fool who lost die. Hmmmm. That is discouraging.

Conclusion.

And so Solomon said in his heart, "Why bother trying to be wise?" *Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" (v.15a)*.

Why bother trying to be wise when thinking and acting wisely takes work. It requires a continual process of gaining knowledge and putting that knowledge into practice. It requires discipline to be able to identify unnecessary or harmful desires. It requires mental and physical discipline to avoid those desires.

The difference between wisdom and folly can be well illustrated in the physical realm of a diet and exercise lifestyle. If we are not disciplined, if we do whatever we feel like doing, especially in the American experience, we will become overweight, malnourished, and in poor physical condition. The natural desire is not to put forth the effort necessary to sweat and endure the pain of exercise. It is way easier to sit down and watch something mindless on television or the internet. If we yield to our natural desires, we will eat too much food that is not profitable to our physical well being. A diet of chips, sodas, and Twinkies is going to result in a very bad physical condition. It requires discipline NOT to do that.

So what? In the end, we are all going to die. Why not die happy? What a horrible conclusion! But that is a fair conclusion according to Solomon. He learned that making gain through wisdom is futile. *And I said in my heart that this also is vanity (v.15b)*. And so we come to the horrible conclusion again, that exercising wisdom, discipline, trying to have character in life is futile. In the end, we all come to the same kind of grave and discover that life was merely chasing after wind.

No wonder we conclude with Solomon, "I hated life because of its end." Death is the hated reality. *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 (v. 16)*! The wise person and the fool both end up at the grave. This is the unavoidable end. Because of the sin principle, we will all arrive at this end sooner or later. It is such a sad reality that we try not to think about it. The normal response is to stay so distracted that we won't think about pending death.

But worse than dying is the reality that a few years after we are dead no one remembers us. Relatively few people accomplish enough in life to be remembered after their death. Even the great heros of a culture are eventually forgotten by the masses. Sure, historians remember the names of the heros, and when they see a statue or monument can call to mind what that person accomplished. But how many historians are there in your sphere?

We are forgotten even by our families within two generations. Some time take a stroll through a cemetery and read the names and epitaphs written about those named. Try to imagine who they were,

where they lived, when they lived, and what they accomplished. Imagination is all you have because almost no one knows any details about the departed person's life.

What do we conclude? Life ending in death is vanity. *So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind (v.17)*. Everything accomplished under the sun comes to naught. It is a grievous thing to think about. It is futility, like grabbing a handful of wind. An honest assessment of the futility of life should bring us to the conclusion that it is all to be hated. What hope can we possibly have?

In closing, let's consider God's answer to the mess sin has created. Life in the sinful world is futile. But, Christ came that we might have real life. God the Son graciously condescended to enter into this sin-sick, sin-infected, sin-cursed world. He came to the sphere of death and disappointment to offer life. Thankfully, John taught us, *In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:4)*.

Solomon was exactly right to conclude that the fool walks in darkness. The spiritual darkness is worse than intellectual darkness. And we are all born as fools who say in our hearts, "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1), which reads most literally, "NO God!" In this world of intentional spiritual darkness are those who exercise human wisdom, walk in intellectual light, but in the end still find no gain.

But Christ came to shed the light of truth into the world of darkness. Christ came that we might have spiritual light that leads to eternal life. He revealed, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12).

More than being the light of truth in a very dark and sinful world is the wonder that Christ came to offer real life, fullness of life, to the hopeless, those who have discovered that life offers only "hebel." He taught, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10).

God the Son came into this hopeless world to offer hope beyond the grave. Solomon was right, we all (whether wise or fool) come to the same end—the grave. And once our loved ones have placed us in the ground, we are promptly forgotten. How many people have been buried in the ground with no marker, no identifier, no name, no

remembrance they ever existed? How many ashes have been scattered to the wind leaving no trace the person ever existed? Has God lost track? No.

Those of us who have placed our trust in Christ's finished work of atonement have hope against a hopeless life. We rest securely in the promise Jesus offered to Martha, Lazarus' sister. *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (John 11:25).

It is okay for us to agree with Solomon that this earthly life offers no satisfaction as long as we hope in Christ. Jesus said, *"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life"* (John 12:25). Knowing Christ makes all the difference in how we live this life. To know Him is not a matter of acquaintance or intellectual knowledge. To know is to live in an intimate relationship. To know is to experience the miracle of regeneration. *"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"* (John 17:3).

We are right to conclude that if this life is all there is, it really is vain. Even God's children, those who He has brought from spiritual death into abundant life, need to guard against living as though this passing life is all there is. Solomon's grand experiment focused on everything that is passing away. Solomon tried to find meaning and satisfaction in everything that natural, unsaved people consider important, useful, satisfying.

The unsaved person must embrace these passing fancies because it is all the world, life has to offer. And ultimately, everyone concludes, at the very least at the grave, that it was all an empty and sick joke. Even in our spiritual life we can lose sight of the wonder of Christ's resurrection and all that it means to us. It is as Paul concluded, *If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19)*.

Our Lord's resurrection adds meaning to a meaningless life. Because He lives, we believe we also will live beyond the grave. Paul went on to offer the good news, *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20)*. Our hope in a hopeless life is that we will not just die and be forgotten. Peter wrote, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused*

us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

While we muddle through a very discouraging and hopeless life in a sinful world, our faith, our hope, firmly resting in God. *Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:18-21).*

Our steadfast hope in a hopeless world of futility is the astonishing work of God through Christ Jesus. Our Creator, who sustains all things for eternity, bought us out of futility with the precious blood of His Beloved Son. God opened our spiritual eyes to our need of the Savior. God the Holy Spirit brought us to Jesus and made us believers in God. Our faith and our hope are in Him alone.

How ironic that the message the world disdains, despises, rejects as foolishness, is the only source of hope in a hopeless world. The one hope for eternal life is generally ignored and rejected by those who will eventually die, leave everything behind, and quickly be forgotten. What an amazing contrast between hope and hopelessness. How incredibly foolish it is to spend 80 years chasing that which ends in futility instead of embracing Him who alone offers eternal life. How foolish for us who are privileged to believe in Christ unto abundant life, to treat that life as unimportant while we chase after stuff that is passing away.