

Living a Meaningful Life

The Vanity of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

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Scripture

Dr. David A. Hubbard, former president and professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, told the following story in his commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes:

I hated to dampen their sparkling spirits, but I had to help them face reality. Year after year I went through the experience. It was during the time I served as a teacher at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. Each fall I had the privilege of addressing the entering class, eager as they were to savor their new experience, zealous as they were to pursue their course of learning.

I hated to weigh down their buoyant minds, but I had to help them see what they were in for. What do you want to get out of college? I would ask them. Spiritual inspiration? Great! I am all for it, but if that is your main goal you should go to summer conferences and deeper life retreats. What do you seek in college? Fun? Good times? Friendships? Recreation? Fine, I would answer, but you would find all of them in your local country club—and for far less money. What is it you are looking for in these halls of learning? Information? Facts? Knowledge? Excellent! I heartily approved, but would you not do better to buy a comprehensive encyclopedia and memorize its data in the comfort of your own home?

I could not guarantee that the bright, bubbly men and women in the freshman class would gain spiritual inspiration, wholesome recreation, or useful information, though I hoped and prayed that their cup would be filled with these daily. What I did guarantee was something quite different, something totally unexpected. “You can be sure,” I promised them, “that one thing will happen to you, if your college education really takes: your capacity for suffering will increase.”¹

¹ David A. Hubbard and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 16, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 16: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The Preacher's Commentary series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1991), 57-58.

Dr. Hubbard was sharing with his students the same message that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes shared with his students several thousand years ago. The Preacher knew full well the vanity of wisdom, the meaninglessness of wisdom, the futility of wisdom—apart from God.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18:

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.**

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. (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)**

Introduction

In his book *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams writes about Deep Thought, the powerful supercomputer that is tasked with determining the Answers to Life, the Universe, and Everything. It takes the computer a long time to check and double-check its computations—seven and a half million years, to be exact—but eventually it spits out a simple, unambiguous answer: the meaning of life is 42.

“Forty-two!” someone yells at the computer. “Is that all you’ve got to show for seven and a half million years’ work?”

“I checked it very thoroughly,” Deep Thought replies, “and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is.”²

Everyone wants to know the answer to the meaning of life. But to get the right answer we have to ask the right question.

That is why we are studying the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. We are studying this marvelous book to learn the answer to the meaning of life and how to live a meaningful life.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes teaches us the answer to the meaning of life and how to live a meaningful life. And fortunately, it takes a lot less than seven and a half million years!

Review

The Preacher, also known as Qoheleth, opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11). His theme is simply that *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”³ It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher’s theme is that everything in life is meaningless. However, the Preacher eventually gives a corrective. He says that everything in life is meaningless *without God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don’t live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

² Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Books, 1979), 162.

³ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

Lesson

The Preacher now begins to explore several areas of life which demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless without God. The Preacher begins with the vanity of wisdom.

In today's lesson learn that apart from God, we will not gain anything from wisdom.

I. The Initial Quest (1:12-13)

First, let's look at the initial quest.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:12, **“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.”**

The author of Ecclesiastes identifies himself as the **king over Israel in Jerusalem**. While some Bible scholars believe that this is Solomon, others believe (as I do) that the author wrote Ecclesiastes in the third century BC.⁴ He identified himself as a Solomon-like figure because Solomon was widely regarded as the wisest of all people and having incalculable wealth.

And so the Preacher begins his initial quest in Ecclesiastes 1:13, **“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.”**

The Preacher wanted to know the answer to the meaning of life. He wanted to know how to live a meaningful life.

Notice several things about the initial quest.

First, the quest is sincere. When the Preacher says, **“And I applied my heart,”** he means that his pursuit of wisdom comes from the very core of his being.

Second, his quest is thorough. The verbs **“to seek”** and **“to**

⁴ See my sermon on “Introduction to Ecclesiastes,” preached on July 11, 2010.

search” indicate the seriousness of his efforts.

Third, his quest is commendable. The Preacher does not look for the meaning of life in popularity, pleasure, personal accomplishments, or riches. Rather, he looks for the answer to the meaning of life **“by wisdom.”**

Fourth, his quest is comprehensive. He does not merely search out some things or even many or most things, but in fact he searches out **“all that is done under heaven.”**

And fifth, his quest is obligatory. He says, **“It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”**

Seeking wisdom is a worthy pursuit. All truth is God’s truth—even for the atheist who denies that there is a God! Whatever we learn that is true is ultimately a gift from God. Even people who do not know God personally have a certain amount of practical wisdom for living daily life. This is what theologians call “common grace.”

However, the question is: How far will such wisdom take us? Will it help us to know the true meaning of life? Will it help us to know and worship Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners?

The fact is that the Preacher comes up totally empty as he tries to answer these questions.

II. The Preliminary Conclusions (1:14-15)

Second, notice the preliminary conclusions.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:14, **“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”**

The phrase **“under the sun”** is one of the keys to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. **“Under the sun”** refers to living in this world without taking God into account.⁵ One commentator

⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 43.

puts it this way: “The scene in mind is exclusively the world we can observe, and. . . our observation point is at ground level.”⁶ So, we live **under the sun**. But God’s perspective is, as it were, *above the sun*.

The Preacher concludes that **everything that is done under the sun. . . is vanity**. That is, everything that is done without taking God into account is meaningless. In fact, everything that is done without taking God into account is like **striving after wind**.

Do you remember that commercial during a Super Bowl several years ago that was called “cat herding”? The commercial featured several thousand cats running in every direction except the direction in which the ranchers on their horses wanted the cats to run. The Hebrew word for **striving** is very similar to “herding.” And so the Preacher is literally saying that everything that is done without taking God into account is like herding the wind—it cannot be done!

And so the Preacher gives us a proverb in Ecclesiastes 1:15, **“What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”**

There are things in life that will not straighten out, and sometimes things just don’t add up. That is the meaning of the proverb. People suffer difficulties, mistakes, trials, accidents, and so on. Life doesn’t always make the kind of sense that we would like it to do.

And so the Preacher’s preliminary conclusion is that apart from God, we will not gain anything from wisdom.

Other good minds have reached the same conclusion. Before he died, the modernist poet Ezra Pound said, “All my life I believed I knew something. But then one strange day came when I realized that I knew nothing; yes, I knew nothing. And so words became void of meaning.”⁷

Similarly, the notorious atheist and evolutionist Richard

⁶ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 23.

⁷ See http://www.quoteland.com/topic.asp?CATEGORY_ID=89.

Dawkins has concluded that human existence is “neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous: indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.”⁸

And so George Herbert said, “Knowledge is but folly unless it is guided by grace.”⁹

III. The Intensified Quest (1:16-18)

And third, notice the intensified quest.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:16, **“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.’”**

The Preacher is stressing that he has greater wisdom and knowledge than anyone else. And still he does not know the answer to the meaning of life.

So, now the Preacher decides to contrast wisdom and folly. And so the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:17a, **“And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.”** When the Preacher says **“madness and folly,”** he is not talking about insanity but about immorality. In other words, the Preacher is using **“madness and folly”** the way they are usually used in the Old Testament—to refer to the mad foolishness of living in disobedience to God. The Preacher is not trying to see if losing his right mind would help him understand the meaning of life. Rather, he is trying to understand the difference between right and wrong.¹⁰

And what did he conclude? He says in Ecclesiastes 1:17b, **“I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.”** Just as he discovered earlier, the Preacher learned that trying to live what he believed to be a good life was also **but a striving after wind.**

Once again the Preacher quoted a proverb that summarized

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), 96.

⁹ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 367.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 42.

the conclusion of his quest. Human wisdom failed because it could not straighten things or make life add up (1:15). But knowing the difference between right and wrong failed for an additional reason: **“For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow”** (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

The Preacher is saying that wisdom and knowledge don't give one the answer to the meaning of life. In fact, as one commentator puts it, gaining wisdom “leads a man to find out many disturbing things that may militate strongly against his peace of mind.”¹¹

Perhaps that is why people sometimes say, “Ignorance is bliss.” Sometimes, the more we know, the more trouble it brings.

Conclusion

And so the Preacher's final conclusion still is that apart from God, we will not gain anything from wisdom.

In the last decade or so, we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of outspoken atheists. They publish prolifically, and we are confronted with their views in print and also on the air. They communicate with a great bravado and confidence. Further, you and I seem to meet more people who are openly opposed to Christianity than before. They, like many of the “new” atheists, talk about the superiority of their wisdom, knowledge, rationalism, and so on. What the Preacher is saying, however, is that that apart from God, we will not gain anything from wisdom.

Further, I put it to you that a three-year-old child, who has embraced Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, has truly discovered the meaning of life rather than all the atheists in the world put together. They may boast of their wisdom and knowledge, but it is not a knowledge that leads to eternal life.

If we look at our world from our earthbound perspective, we will never escape Ecclesiastes 1. We can study all the philosophy,

¹¹ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1952), 55.

research all the religion, take all the personal improvement courses, and it will still end in vexation and sorrow. Human reason and human wisdom will only take us so far, which is why God tells us not to boast in our own wisdom, but only in our knowledge of him: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, . . . but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me” (Jeremiah 9:23-24). In the New Testament, God goes even further and says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:19; cf. Isaiah 29:14). Ecclesiastes is one of the sources that demonstrate God destroying the pretensions of human wisdom by showing how empty all our learning is without him.

But God does not leave us in despair. At the end of our quest, God comes to find us in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ, whom the Bible describes as “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). Jesus entered into the vexation and sorrow of this fallen world in order to show us the wise way to live.

His way is the way of faith, in which we trust God to be true to his word.

His way is the way of hope, in which we look forward to what God has for us in the future.

And his way is the way of love, in which we find meaning in life by living for others rather than for ourselves.

If we follow Jesus and his wisdom, we will not keep trying to bend what is crooked back to our own purpose but will humbly submit to the way God wants things to be, just like Jesus did when he went to the cross and died for our sins (see 1 Peter 2:21-24).

If we follow Jesus and his wisdom, life will add up. It will never add up to anything as simple as 42, of course, and it may not always seem to add up on this side of eternity. Therefore, we need to be content to leave the final calculation to God.

Jesus will see to it that all of God’s books balance in the end, including our own personal account, which he will reconcile with his own blood.

Thus our present vexation will not last forever, including all the struggles we have to understand the meaning of life.

Soon, all our sorrows will be over. To our everlasting joy, we will be with Jesus forever, and we will find in him the answer to all our questions.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher teaches us that apart from God, we will not gain anything from wisdom.

Teach us how to live a meaningful life by trusting in Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.