

WHAT MAKES SENSE WHEN LIFE DOESN'T.

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26.

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 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. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

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

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." 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.

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

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 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. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 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 children of man.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 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. 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.

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. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 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. 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. 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 lies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

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, 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. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors

under the sun, 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. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 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.

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, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 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.

Introduction - The Search for Meaning.

One of the great things about Switzerland is its railway system. There are many nice things about Switzerland, but that is one of them. The system is efficient. There are plenty of trains criss-crossing the country. Many of the trains are quite new. They are fast, they are quiet, and they are dependable. There are exceptions, but a lot of the time you could pretty much set your watch by the trains. If it says in the timetable that the train for Zurich leaves the platform at 11.57, when you see its doors close and watch it start to move away from the station, you could almost bet the money in your secret Swiss bank account that it is indeed 11:57.

It is good that there are things in life you can depend on. We need them. Generally you want to be able to rely on buses and trains. You need to know that if you board a flight to London you are not going to end up in Newcastle on Tyne. When you post a cheque, you are depending on the postal system doing its job. Think of the chaos in a city centre when the traffic lights fail. Think about natural laws. What if gravity stopped working? What if we could never be sure what time the sun would rise and set?

We like to transfer this idea to the moral universe. We like to think we live in a universe with moral laws that always work in the same way. We would like to think that good people always live happily ever after. We would like to think that life is always fair. In its simplest form we would like to live in a world where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Sometimes we think that is what the Bible is saying.

I think that is how the friends of Job viewed life. According to their view, Job must have done something terrible. If he would only own up, things would start to go well for him again. So on and on they went, hammering the poor man without really knowing what they were talking about.

Life does not always work. I once had a neighbour who was approaching early retirement. It was probably the week of his retirement that he was given three months to live. He was buried three months later. What about those years of rest that he thought were waiting for him.

We don't like it when life does that. It is possible to become very cynical. Like the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes. He looked for meaning, but struggled to find it.

Meet the Preacher - 1:12-18.

In verse 12 the Preacher starts to address us directly. We meet him face to face. The first 11 verses have served as a prologue, introducing us to what we can expect to find along the journey. They talked about the restless, repetitive, meaningless cycles of life under the sun.

From verse 12 to verse 18 the Preacher underlines what is coming. He is looking back on his journey and his search for meaning. It is fairly negative. Life under the sun does not make sense. It is vanity and striving after wind. Even the search for wisdom he describes as striving after wind.

Notice three key things from his summary.

1. God has brought this about.

In verse 13 he describes this meaninglessness as a unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. You almost wonder why God would allow such a comment to stand in the Bible, but there are several things you need to remember when you read this.

Don't forget that the Preacher's cynicism is not the final word. It is not the final word in the book (its message, which we will see at the end, is that we need to fear God). Nor is it the final word in the Bible. I will say more about this in a moment.

But factually the Preacher is actually right. God has put this heavy burden on our shoulders. One of the most helpful lenses through which to read Ecclesiastes is Romans 8:20 which talk about how the creation has been subjected to futility in hope of redemption. The world is not the way God originally made it; it is a fallen world and has been subjected to the futility of the curse. It is still the world God made, and that is why we will still find beauty and order; but it is fallen and that is why we find chaos and pain. But it is chaos and pain that point forward in hope to the completion of God's work of redemption. The Preacher does not have such a long term view. He really only sees the futility.

2. Life is like a puzzle with pieces missing.

Verse 15 is like a short proverb:

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

I am sure you have noticed that Northern Ireland has its first Ikea. Now that peace has broken out we can enjoy flat-back furniture, like the rest of the world (though there has always been Argos and there used to be MFI). You know how flatback furniture works. You unpack the boxes and get to work on the shelf unit or the wardrobe or whatever it is. You start to piece it all together. If you are like me, you have probably had the experience where you have joined two pieces the wrong way; now the inside of the unit is on the outside, or the unit stands at an angle because you misunderstood which piece was which. Frustration. What is worse than having to undo what you have done to start again! But what do you do if a piece is missing? Or if you break a piece and you can't use it?

The Preacher's proverb says that life is like that! To give another analogy, it is like a jigsaw puzzle with some key pieces missing. You turn the box upside down, you look under the sofa, but to no avail. There are pieces missing and the picture cannot be completed. That is how the Preacher views life under the sun.

3. It is better not to know too much.

Verse 18 is a further proverb:

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

The more you know, the more painful life becomes. I read once of a boy who brought home a school report with the following comment. "If ignorance is bliss, your son is going to have a very happy life."

In other words, as you get ready to travel with the Preacher, he is warning you that this is not going to be a joy ride.

There are three basic phases of his search for meaning in chapter 2. The first is his attempt to find meaning through self indulgence. He is going to enjoy himself.

Looking for meaning in pleasure and achievement - 2:1-11.

We are not entirely sure if this is actually Solomon writing or if it is a teacher who is using Solomon as a character in his story. But if there was anyone in the history of ancient Israel who was equipped to find meaning through pleasure and achievement, it was Solomon.

Solomon was the third king of Israel. He had an international reputation for wisdom. It is said that he made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones. Included in his daily provisions were 30 cattle, along with sheep, deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl. Some estimates reckon that it could take between 30 and 40,000 people to consume the amount of food he had each day.

Is it possible to find meaning and purpose through self-indulgence?

The Preacher tried pleasure and laughter. Ultimately, laughter was mad and he could not see the use for pleasure. He tried wine, he tried building projects - not, by the way, projects for the good of others, but projects that were built for himself and his own enjoyment.

There were houses and vineyards, gardens and parks. There were trees and pools of water. The place must have started to look like the Garden of Eden. He filled his house with slaves. He gathered up as much wealth as he could. He had singers and he had concubines. Wine, women and song, with buildings, parks and trees. He lived as he pleased, did what he felt like and got what he wanted. There was enjoyment in the process, but there was no ultimate meaning. Look at verse 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.

It is not that the things which he did were not pleasurable; some of them were. But none of that is what life is about.

Looking for meaning in wisdom and folly - 2:12-17.

The second phase of his search is through wisdom and folly.

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. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 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. 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. 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 lies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

As we said, Solomon's wisdom was legendary. No one was better placed to find meaning through wisdom. So he explores it - and folly, an alternative reality. Think of the world of literature where authors and playwrights have tried to put their finger on life's meaning. Some of them have resorted, in despair to folly.

At first glance, wisdom seems better than folly (in contrast to what he has already said). It is like the difference between walking around in the light and walking around in the dark. At least you have some idea of where you are and what is happening. But then he realises, in verse 14, that it makes no difference, whether you are wise or foolish, when death comes. The same thing happens to everyone.

The wise man dies and the foolish man dies. Both are forgotten. We talked about this last week. There are relatively few people whose memories live on long after their death. Even those who are remembered are not always remembered because of their wisdom. History tells us the story of William Wilberforce. It also tells us the story of Idi Amin, or Pol Pot. If no one is going to remember you as a wise person, then there is no real point in hurting your head to be wise today.

Notice that it is death that throws everything askew for the Preacher. Death seems to be the ultimate meaninglessness. And it seems to cast the same cloud over his next area of exploration: hard work.

Looking for meaning in hard work - 2:18-23.

He has already talked about his projects, but now he looks negatively at work. He hated it. The reason was that whatever he achieved, he would have to leave it behind him and there was no guarantee whether this man would be wise or foolish. If your head is hurting, so was his. He despaired.

If your view is “under the sun” death is really a cause for despair. It shatters any meaning you think you have attained.

Look at some verses from Psalm 49

For he sees that even the wise die;
the fool and the stupid alike must perish
and leave their wealth to others.
Their graves are their homes forever,
their dwelling places to all generations,
though they called lands by their own names.
Man in his pomp will not remain;
he is like the beasts that perish.

This sounds like Ecclesiastes. But it is not all.

This is the path of those who have foolish confidence;
yet after them people approve of their boasts. Selah
Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
death shall be their shepherd,
and the upright shall rule over them in the morning.
Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.
But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
for he will receive me.

It is not the full picture of resurrection - that had to wait for Jesus - but it offers a hope beyond the despair.

A glimpse of satisfaction from God - 2:24-26.

At last there is a little glimmer of something different. There are a few short paragraphs like this dotted throughout the book. The Preacher is a cynic, even when he talks about God, but he does question whether God exists. Here and there, he spots little signs of God in people’s lives.

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, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 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.

I don’t think we should take too much out of this, but on the other hand we shouldn’t miss the simple blessings it talks about.

If you think that this life is all there is and that death ends it, then this is the philosophy of *Carpe Diem*, a Latin expression that means to seize the day. As Robin Williams says to his class in *Dead Poets Society*,

carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.

So if this is all there is, you had better make the best of it. If you are fortunate enough to have good food and a reasonable job (if the Preacher would allow that possibility), make the most of it. That is as good as it gets.

If we believe that there is more, that the best is yet to come, that the futility is temporary until God puts everything right, we cannot settle for that. But we can take it as a gift from his hand. "Apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

It is easy for us to miss the simple blessings of common grace. We ought to be thankful to God for the grace that saves us; the grace that provides for our spiritual needs. We ought to be grateful for the forgiveness of our sins. We ought to be grateful when we see God answering prayer. But need also to cultivate the habit of gratitude for a good meal. Or a successful day at work. Or an enjoyable and stimulating evening of conversation. The beauty of a North Coast sunset. If you have ever been able to enjoy any of those, it is a gift from God. Not everyone gets to enjoy them. If you do, you have caught a glimpse of God's goodness, a little piece of meaning in the desert under the sun.

These things are not the ultimate. If we try to make them our reason for living - we live for nice meals, we live for a well-paid career, we live for ever greater experiences of travel and tourism, then we are likely to find them disappearing through our fingers. However as gifts from God, we can enjoy them and be thankful.

I close with a story that I have told before, not so long ago. Then we will sing a song about thankfulness.

In Our Daily Bread, Philip Parham tells the story of a rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat.

"Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked.

"What would I do with them?"

"You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?"

"You could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist.

"What do you think I'm doing now?" the fisherman replied.