

An Empty Life (2): The Emptiness of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:12-17

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 1 as we continue to work through this great, very important, and timely book. We're trying to ask some hard questions of our selves about our life, about this life in general, and the author of Ecclesiastes has already in the first eleven verses asserted to us that life under the sun, that is, life apart from God, is empty, it's vain, it's meaningless, it's without substance and real lasting satisfaction and meaning. That's a very, very hard thing to say, it's very realistic thing he says, and now he begins to back this up in the subsequent verses.

He has begun by making an assertion about life. Life under the sun, life apart from God, life apart from a relationship with God, a saving relationship, an eternal relationship with God Almighty, is empty, he says. It's vain. It's meaningless. It doesn't have any purpose, it doesn't have any explanation to it, and now he now begins to prove that point.

He begins to shut off possible attempts by humans to supply meaning to life without recourse to God. In other words, the response of the person with whom he is in dialogue is going to be, "Oh no, there's meaning to life. I can find meaning in life. I don't have to resort to God or relationship with God to find meaning in life. I can find meaning in "x." And what the author is going to do over the next several chapters, is cut off every possible answer to the question of, "Does life have meaning that supplies a 'yes' and gives as the ground of that meaning anything else than a relationship with the living god.

Beginning in verse 12, the writer addresses wisdom. He begins to systematically shut off all escape routes from the meaninglessness of life under the sun, life considered apart from a relationship with God. As you read this text, don't think, when you hear him say, "Wisdom can't supply the meaning of life," don't think of the air headed philosopher in your college class who was teaching you about Hegelian Synthesis; don't think of some nerdy slide rule covered philosopher of science who was talking to you about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Wisdom isn't in the Old Testament, some sort of technical, esoteric, philosophical, abstractive process. It's very practical. Wisdom, in the Old

Testament, indeed has two sides. One side is reflection, and that gets closer to what we do in philosophy, but the other side is very practical, and by the way, it wasn't just that way in Israel, it was that way all over the Roman world. Even in the parts of the Greco-Roman world from which we get our modern philosophy. For instance, were you to go to Greece and Rome and run into the philosophers known as the Cynics, they were all about *how to*. All they went around doing was selling their product, knowledge of how to do stuff, how to have a better marriage, how to have a better life, how to have make more money, how to be more successful, how to be more respected, how to speak more effectively. They were all about how to. So don't think when Solomon says, "Wisdom can't supply the meaning of life," that he's being impractical and is going in an esoteric direction and is simply criticizing godless philosophers. No. He's going after any kind of human wisdom which purports, in and of itself, to supply the stuff of life, whether it's very practical and how to, like the infomercials that you see on television at night when you can't sleep. Those are the "modern Cynics," those are the modern Cynical philosophers. "You can lose 67 pounds in the next four days on this diet." I give you the modern Cynics, it's the how to. How to look great in four days. You take this pill and you lose weight at night without doing anything else. You don't diet, you don't exercise, and you just lose weight." That's the kind of stuff he's going after, just as surely as he's going after the more esoteric, heady stuff. So, when Solomon speaks about wisdom, he's got more in mind that just egg headed philosophy. He's going after those who see practical tools and instruments whereby life can be made better or meaningful. So let's turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 1, and hear what he has to say about wisdom as the way that a person might find meaning in life:

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

Thus far God's word. Now, chapter 2 verse 12:

So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done? And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool,

it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

Amen. This is God's word, may He impress its truth upon our hearts, let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for the hardness, the frankness, the bluntness of this passage. Wake us up with it, show us the truth by it, show us what is not the way of life, and show us what is. By Your Spirit give us eyes to see that way, and the faith to embrace it, we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Ecclesiastes has an incredibly careful assessment of human wisdom. You might have expected him to criticize all human wisdom as worthless. He doesn't. In fact, explicitly in this passage, especially in chapter 2, the author of Ecclesiastes acknowledges that there is a tremendous advantage to be found in human wisdom. It's very valuable, it's worth having, but it's not the ultimate answer. So he doesn't just write off all human wisdom as valueless; on the other hand, he is acutely aware of the limitations of human wisdom. And in this passage, he says to the person who says, "Look, I can go out and by the process of reflection, and putting into place practical steps in my life, I can supply meaning to this life through human wisdom without recourse to the living God in relationship with Him," the author says, "Oh, you can? Let me show you why you can't, because I've tried that, I've thought about that, I've explored every possible way in which human wisdom might supply the meaning of life, the answers to the fundamental questions of life, and through the course of my study I've found out, it can't." And so, in this passage, Ecclesiastes shows us that the wisdom we may have as humans is indeed one of life's blessings, but it is incapable apart from God, of solving the problem of life and it is incapable, apart from God, of supplying the meaning of life. Basically, beginning in verse 12 of chapter 1, the author of Ecclesiastes gives us six conclusions that he draws from his pursuit of meaning through wisdom.

You will notice the two parts of this discussion, in verses 12-18 of chapter 1, he explains to us why our wisdom can't supply the ultimate meaning of life, part 1. Then, in 2:12-17, he gives you why our wisdom can't supply the meaning of life, part 2. In the first chapter, he discusses the limits and liabilities of wisdom. In the second chapter, he talks about why wisdom is preferable to being foolish, but then talks about the ultimate end to which the wise and foolish both go, and he puts wisdom, human wisdom apart from God, in that perspective. Let's look at what he says.

I. The limitations and liabilities of wisdom.

He begins in verse 12, again, with an allusion to Solomon. "I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." Just as in verse 1, he alludes to Solomon, and this serves to assert that the author knows what he is talking about. Look briefly at verses 16-17, and here he emphasizes that he had magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before him, and that his mind had observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge, and that he had set himself out to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. In other words, he's saying again, I know what I'm talking about. I've collected wisdom, I've collected more wisdom than my predecessors, and I have something to say. And he tells us in verse 13 that he set out in his mind to seek and explore, with wisdom as his tool and guide, everything under heaven. He sought to supply meaning to this world under heaven, considered apart from God, through the vehicle of wisdom. He concentrated all the capacities of his inner thought life to search out deeply and wisely the whole of life, and it led him to a definite opinion regarding whether wisdom, studying all things under heaven, could supply the meaning of life. And here are the six conclusions that he drew from that study.

First, and you'll see this in the second half of verse 13, he says that it is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. In other words, he's saying that human beings can't help but seek out questions to the answers about ultimate meaning in life. Human beings can't live without believing that there is a meaning to this existence. Now, there are some people who will tell you, "Oh, you don't have to answer that question, it's irrelevant to life, in fact, you're better to leave that aside." I once heard a debate between a Christian and an atheist, in which the atheist said, "Look, there's no ultimate meaning to life, and the sooner that we get rid of that, the sooner we can get on with living." Now, think about that for a moment. If you're going to get on with living, by acknowledging that there's no meaning to living, and the quicker you do it the better. Solomon is saying, however, "Look, human beings can't live with that. There may be a few eggheads here and there over the course of the centuries that have been able to rest in that, but human beings are built to live that way. They look for answers to the ultimate questions of life. But, it's frustrating, because when they try and get those answers apart from God, they can't come up with them." So Solomon says that it's grievous task that God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with, and that's the first result of his search for ultimate meaning by the way of human wisdom.

Then, if you look at verse 14, he gives his second conclusion. "I have seen all the works that have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after the wind." Man looks at the world, he looks at history, he looks at the struggle, the search for meaning, for gain, for satisfaction in the lives of individuals, and what does he see? He sees people frustrated by problems that can't be solved, and he looks at people seeking to attain things that they can't attain, and that failure frustrates them. And the more they know, the more frustrated they are. The physician, the neurosurgeon, he's trained, he's the best

in his field, and yet there are some people who walk into his office, and they have a problem that he can't solve. And so the word that he gives to them is, "I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do." With all his knowledge, with all his wisdom, he can't solve every problem. And the wise man is more acutely aware of those problems in our world than the person who is unreflective. So wisdom doesn't help solve that problem for him, it presses that problem more and more into his face and into his consciousness. So we're frustrated by the insolvable and we have an ambition for the unattainable, and when we consider life under the sun, wisdom cannot supply the meaning of it.

Thirdly, in verse 15 he says, "What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted." There are twists and gaps in all our thinking, and there are problems that we can't sort out, we can't figure out in this life. If meaning is supplied to life by us being able to figure it all out, then meaning will never be supplied to this life, because we'll never figure it all out. We find ourselves asking, "Why did it happen to her? Of all people, why did it have to happen to her? Why can't we do something to help them? We love them so, why can't we help them?" There are all sorts of things in this life for which there are no answers. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

In verses 16-18, he tells us a fourth conclusion from his studying wisdom as a solution to meaning in life under the sun. Even though I did in fact increase in wisdom, he says, it brought pain. I magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly, and see why he says in verse 17, "And I realized that this also is striving after the wind," because, in verse 18, "in much wisdom there is much grief." One man has said, "The more you understand, the more you ache." Doctors have to learn to manage that type of knowledge. Sometimes they know things that if you knew; you would give up all hope. You'd be totally discouraged. And they have to figure out how to be honest with you, but at the same time giving you the hope and energy for the fight that's before you. And there knowledge is a grief to them, because they know fully what you're facing. They know how serious it is.

Knowledge, so far from being the answer, the solution to the problems of life, is sometimes the very stuff of the grief of life. "Unaided wisdom, with its strongest wing, Henry Law said, "can only flutter in the vail of vanity, no earthborn eye can catch a glimpse of God." And our culture has done some swinging on this. One hundred twenty-five years ago, our culture was very confident on what we could accomplish through human wisdom. Listen to this quotation from William Kingdon Clifford, from about the 1870s. It's typical of that era, with all its confidence in progress and science. He says this, "Remember then that science is the guide of action, that the truth which science arrives at, we may act on without fear.

And remembering these things, you cannot fail to see that scientific thought is not

an accompaniment or condition of human progress, it is human progress itself.” That’s confident, isn’t it! Scientific thought — it is human progress itself. Things have changed in 125 years. The people of that period of time thought that they saw on the horizon the end of all humanity’s problems. There was a president who lived not too long after that quote was given who began a League of Nations, and who believed that when he took the United States into the First World War, that it was going to be the war to end all wars. Here we are in 2003, and that optimistic prognostication doesn’t look as wise as it might have seemed then. So, one of our modern philosophers, Sting, can say this, “You could say, I’ve lost my faith in science and progress. I never saw no miracle of science that didn’t go from a blessing to a curse.” The whole perspective on the ultimate victory of science, human wisdom to supply the meanings of life and solve the problems of life has crumbled before our eyes in a postmodern age. But, thousands of years before our cynical culture came to that point, the author of Ecclesiastes had seen that, and he said, if you’re looking for ultimate hope in what human wisdom can supply apart from God, you’re not going to find it.

II. Why our wisdom can't supply the ultimate basis for a meaningful life.

In chapter 2:12-17, here's why our wisdom can't supply the ultimate basis for a meaningful life, part 2. The author has already asserted in chapter 1 that wisdom can't fix meaninglessness, and it can't create meaning, and here in chapter 2, he pulls back and say, “Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that it is preferable to be a foolish man as opposed to being a wise man. No. Wisdom is preferable to folly, but, both wisdom and folly face the same end.” There is a preferability to wisdom, but both wisdom and folly face one reality, and wisdom faces a reality that it can’t change or transcend or better.

In verse 12-14, “I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly. For what will the man do who will come after the king, except what has already been done. And I say that wisdom excels folly and light exceeds darkness. The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” All of these things that have been said about the liabilities and limits of wisdom are true, but all of that being said, it’s still better to be wise rather than a fool. And you want the engineer that did the math on the roof to be wise. If engineers had “wise” and “fool” on their forehead you’d be hiring the guy with “wise” on his forehead. Because wisdom does matter. He’s not against all human enterprise and knowledge here. He’s saying it’s good to be wise, but you won’t find the meaning of life there apart from God. And here’s the cold splash of water on the face of reality in verses 14-17, “and yet I know that one fate befalls them both. As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. The wise man and the fool alike die.” The wise and fool both die and are forgotten, so what good does that do for me in terms of the ultimate things of this life, to be wise as opposed to being a fool.

Not long ago a minister told a story during an address in Chicago, which came

from his childhood. He and his family had all enjoyed playing monopoly while they were on family vacations, and their grandmother was the world champion monopoly player. She could clean everybody's clock in a game. She understood buying low and selling high; she understood the game. The younger kids didn't quite catch on and they just got slaughtered year after year at monopoly with grandma, until it became the driving goal of the siblings to beat grandmom at monopoly. Finally, when this young man approached the age of 15 he had grasped the genius of the game, that you couldn't hold on to your cash, but you had to spend money to make money, that you had to buy property in order to charge others, and that was the way to winning the game, along with some good rolls of the dice. So, on one family vacation he began this game with grandmom, and for the first time ever, he began to win. Then the adrenalin started pumping, and it was his goal to slaughter grandmother in this game. He wanted to clean her out of every property and every monopoly dollar she had, and eventually he did that. She was left penniless and propertyless in the game. And he was exalting in this victory that he had won over his beloved grandmother, and as he was exalting, she took the money and the board pieces, folded the board together, and poured it back in and said, "Now that you've learned the secret of winning the game, there's one more lesson to learn: when the game is over, it all goes back in the box." And that's what Solomon is saying. It doesn't matter how wise you are, if you live this life apart from God, this is the one truth you must face. When the game is over, it all goes back in the box. And apart from God, no life view that fails to take into account and adequately deal with death is capable of supplying the real meaning of life. And that's what Solomon is reminding us of here in chapter 2. Only transcendent wisdom can meet the demands of a transcendent reality, and that's why Jesus is the only wisdom that can make life meaningful.

III. Why Jesus is the only wisdom that can make life meaningful.

Isn't it interesting that in light of what we've learned about wisdom in this book, that John in chapter 1 verse 14 will say that "Jesus was God's wisdom made flesh, dwelling among us, the fullness of deity in bodily form." Isn't it interesting that Jesus will say to His disciples in John 14:6, "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life." Isn't it interesting that Isaiah 53:11 will say of the Messiah, "That by His knowledge the righteous one will save the many."

And isn't it interesting that Jesus, in concluding the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24-29, will say that "The wise man will build his house on Jesus and His words." You see, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of true wisdom, and that's why humility and teachability is the hallmark of true wisdom. And Jesus will say in Matthew 11, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am humble and I will give you rest for your souls." May God grant that we would be truly wise and seek Him as the one who will give rest for our souls. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, give us that true and heavenly wisdom, that wisdom from above, that wisdom that is found only in Your Son. Help us to seek the meaning of life there, and not here under the sun, apart from You. Give us the grace to believe Your word, and we will give You the praise for it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Confession of Faith — The Apostles' Creed

Our congregation regularly confesses our common faith, that is, we publicly state what we believe to be true about God and reality, including the Christian life and salvation. We do this using various historic, orthodox, creedal statements, like the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed was not composed *per se* by the Apostles themselves but its affirmations are "apostolic" in the sense that they are biblical. Two phrases in the creed often confuse some Christians. The reference to the "holy catholic church" does not entail a recognition of the Roman Catholic Church as the one true church but rather indicates one's commitment to the spiritual unity of the visible church, the "society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children." The phrase "he descended into hell" refers to Christ's bearing of God's wrath on our behalf on the cross and his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day."

The Psalms and Hymns

All People That on Earth Do Dwell (Psalm 100)

This, one of the best known and loved metrical psalms of the Reformed tradition, is first found in *Fourscore and Seven Psalms of David* (published in Geneva, Switzerland: 1561). It is attributed to William Kethe (whose birth date is unknown but who died June 6, 1594, in Dorsetshire, England). Kethe was a Scottish minister who spent a great deal of time in exile for his faith. He lived in both Frankfurt, Germany, and Geneva, Switzerland, and helped translate the Geneva Bible in 1560. Two dozen of his hymns appeared in the *Anglo-Genevan Psalter* of 1561. The tune belongs to Louis Bourgeois. Bourgeois was born, circa 1510, in Paris, France, and followed John Calvin to Geneva, Switzerland, in 1541, where he became a cantor at the Church of St. Pierre, and edited the *Genevan Psalter*. At one point, he was jailed for modifying some well-known tunes! Being a church musician has always had its challenges!

Jesus Shall Reign (Psalm 72)

This is Isaac Watts' famous New Testament paraphrase of Psalm 72. This hymn is a bold declaration that one day "every knee shall bow, and every tongue

confess that Jesus is Lord.” It speaks of the sovereign reign of Christ the Mediator, even over the Gentiles. Very appropriate in response to the morning Scripture reading.

This Is My Father's World

While minister of the Lockport Presbyterian Church in Lockport, New York, the hymn's author liked to hike in an area called “the escarpment,” an ancient upthrust ledge near Lockport. It has a marvelous view of farms, orchards, and Lake Ontario, about 15 miles distant. It is said those walks in the woods inspired these lyrics. The title recalls an expression Babcock used when starting a walk: “I'm going out to see my Father's world.” Babcock never heard his famous hymn sung. He published nothing during his life, but his wife Catherine collected and published many of his writings after his untimely death – a volume of his poems contained “This Is My Father's World.” Babcock attended Syracuse University and Auburn Theological Seminary. He ranked high as a student and participated in both athletic and musical activities. Tall, broad shouldered, and muscular, he was president of the baseball team, an expert pitcher, and a good swimmer. He played several musical instruments, directed the school orchestra, and played the organ and composed for it. He was a singer and leader of the glee club. He could do impersonations, was clever at drawing, and had a knack with tools. He was also an avid fisherman. He might have become a professional musician had he not chosen the ministry. Over the course of his ministry, he was asked to preach at colleges all over America. Babcock was not a great theologian or deep thinker, but had a talent for presenting spiritual and ethical truths with freshness and effect. In doing this, he was aided by his agile mind, wide range of knowledge, dramatic ability, speech fluency, and magnetic personality. (Cyberhymnal)

O Word of God Incarnate

A great hymn of faith acknowledging Jesus Christ Himself to be true wisdom, in the flesh. An important truth to know and embrace, in light of the morning's message about the emptiness of wisdom apart from God.

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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