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“Chasing After The Wind”

The Futility of Wisdom

(ECCLESIASTES 1:12-18; 2:12-17)

Introduction

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1. Long ago, Jesus spoke to a crowd of people by the Sea of Galilee and said,
“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19–21, NASB95)
2. David Gibson, in his book on Ecclesiastes, said that “People who follow Jesus often lose sight of the world to come. We become resident Christians rather than nomadic Christians.” (p. 36).
3. Instead of seeing ourselves as just passing through, we live as if our greatest treasures are to be found in the here and now.
4. Tonight, in our study of Ecclesiastes, I would like for us to see what Solomon had to say about our tendency to hold onto the good things of this world too tightly.
5. We will spend our time in two sections of the book which focus on the same theme, “The Futility of Wisdom.”
 - a. First, we will first we will finish the last six verses of chapter one, in which Solomon speaks of the “grievous task” placed upon us.
 - b. Secondly, we will look at comparisons he makes in 2:12-16, between wisdom and light, folly and darkness.

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I. A Grievous Task (1:12-17)

A. NOT EVERYTHING CAN BE CHANGED

1. In these verses, Solomon again refers to himself as "the Preacher" ("the Teacher," NIV84, HCSB), and states that he is "king over Israel in Jerusalem."
2. When he states, "I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven" (1:13), he is telling us that he has made "a thorough and comprehensive investigation of all kinds of human activities"¹
3. Solomon's conclusion is found at the end of verse 13: "It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with."
 - a. "Grievous task" — "sore travail," KJV; burdensome task," NKJV; "miserable task," HCSB; "unhappy business," ESV; "heavy burden," NIV84).
 - b. Not only does Solomon consider this an exhausting pursuit, it is one that God has given to "the sons of men," mankind.
 - d. When God first gave life to Adam, the world had not been cursed because of sin (Genesis 3:14ff.).
 - e. Adam's sin brought a curse upon all creation, to the extent that Paul said, "the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Romans 8:22, NASB95).
 - f. This is one reason why life is so difficult.

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4. Solomon utilized three terms to describe this work of mankind which he has

¹ Glenn, Donald R. "Ecclesiastes." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, edited by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985.

been observing:

- a. It is work done "under the sun" — all that we as humans do here upon the earth.
 - b. It is all "vanity" — "a mere breath," "meaningless."
 - c. We are "striving after wind" — "vexation of spirit" (KJV); "grasping for the wind" (NKJV); "chasing after the wind" (NIV84)
 - 1) Can we ever catch the wind by chasing after it? No.
 - 2) What do we pull back when we grasp for the wind? Nothing.
5. Solomon sums up what he is saying with the proverb we find here in verse 15:

"What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted." (Ecclesiastes 1:15, NASB95)

- a. There are some problems which neither you nor I will ever be able to solve, and some information which we will never be able to find.
- b. Another way we may interpret this is that we can't always change the past, thus it is foolish to worry over what we might have done.
- c. The Living Bible translates Solomon's words as, "What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam; and there is no use thinking of what might have been."

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B. "TIS FOLLY TO BE WISE"

1. Solomon now reveals to us the extent of his wisdom and knowledge:
 - a. "I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me" (v. 16a).
 - b. "... my mind observed a wealth [abundance] of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 16b).
2. But even his wisdom and the extent of his wealth, which he reveals to us in

the beginning of chapter 2, did not enable him to find all the answers he was seeking.

3. Solomon utilized his mind to examine the idea of a life of pleasure — “madness and folly” — from a philosophical standpoint.

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4. This pursuit also resulted in a “chasing after the wind” (v. 17).
5. In verse 18, Solomon sums up what he has learned with another proverb:

“Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain” (Ecclesiastes 1:18, NASB95).
6. If anything, Solomon found that his great wisdom only added to his difficulties by increasing sorrow and grief.
7. Knowledge, in and of itself, can never make us happy.
 - a. The more we learn and the wiser we become, the more we realize just how ignorant we are.
 - a. This side of heaven, there are no explanations for some things that happen, and God is not obligated to explain them anyway.
 - b. Even if He were to explain, we still might not understand.
8. In 1742, the poet Thomas Gray, wrote these words, “where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.”²
9. In 1 Corinthians 2:24, the apostle Paul declared Jesus Christ to be “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”
10. He is the One who miraculously entered into history to bring new life to those who trust in Him.

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III. The Preacher's Comparisons (2:12-16)

² Thomas Gray, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, 1742

A. ALL MEN SEEK HAPPINESS (V. 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?" (Ecclesiastes 2:12, NASB95)

1. Listen to these words by the 17th century mathematician, physicist and philosopher, Blaise Pascal:

"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, they all tend to this end."³

2. David Gibson, writing almost 250 years later, in his book on Ecclesiastes, titled "Living Life Backward" states,

"What we long for and live for is happiness, on the surface of our lives and at the deepest level of our lives. In all our varied pursuits — earning a living, finding a spouse, raising good children, having fun, keeping fit — we exhibit a common desire to be happy in what we do."⁴

3. It is what mankind has done since time immemorial.

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B. WISDOM AND FOLLY, LIGHT AND DARKNESS (VV. 13-14A)

"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." (Ecclesiastes 2:13-14, NASB95)

1. Solomon compares wisdom and folly with light and darkness.
2. "Wisdom excels folly" even as "light excels darkness"
 - a. "There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness" (ESV).

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (Boston: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 113.

⁴ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches us to Live in Light of the End*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), pp. 38-39.

- b. "There is an advantage of wisdom over folly even as there is an advantage of light over darkness" (H. C. Leupold)
- 3. Wisdom is like light.
 - a. When Solomon tells us that "the wise man's eyes are in his head," (v. 14a), he is saying, the wise know where they are going, even if they only know they are heading for trouble.
 - 1) Thus, they can avoid some disasters and be prepared for others.
 - 2) The wise man knows his death is coming.
 - 3) He contemplates it and prepares for it.
 - c. On the other hand, the fact that "the fool walks in darkness" (v. 14b), means he is always surprised by the events which happen to him.
 - 1) Have you ever tripped over something in the dark?
 - 2) Solomon's point is that this is the way it is with the fool.
 - 3) Because he does not think about his eventual death, he stumbles into it without any preparation.

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B. DEATH, THE GREAT EQUALIZER

"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." (Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15, NASB95)

- 1. "Fate" (NASB95), "Event" (KJV, NKJV, ASV)
- 2. Heb. "*Miqreh*" — incident, chance; fate, condition
- 3. Here, Solomon's reference is to death.
- 4. Solomon's awareness of his own mortality is sobering.
- 5. Death is the great leveler of all men — it stalks both the wise and the foolish.
- 6. The wise man's (intellectual's) real hope is that he will achieve lasting fame

and be long remembered for his great contributions.

7. What have we often heard, and perhaps even said ourselves?

"Get into the best schools, study hard, do well, get a good job, climb the ladder of success, you'll go far."

7. The Preacher pronounces all this to be an illusion.

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8. Future generations will no more remember the scholar than they will the beggar on the street.

"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!" (Ecclesiastes 2:16, NASB95)

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9. Solomon concludes by telling us, "So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility [breath] and striving after wind [chasing the wind]." (Ecclesiastes 2:17, NASB95).

- a. Solomon hated life because he thought that he had been pursuing a grand task in his quest for wisdom.
- b. Instead, life had played a trick on him; he had been trying to catch the wind.
- c. Like the fool, his efforts and accomplishments were destined for oblivion.

Conclusion

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1. Before I leave you too depressed with Solomon's findings, let me jump ahead to the end of Ecclesiastes 2 and share with you something which Solomon wrote:

"There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?" (Ecclesiastes 2:24–25, NASB95)

2. Death forces us to stop and recognize our limitations as human beings.
3. It helps us to see God's good gifts which have been right in front of us all the time, each and every day of our lives.
4. Instead of using these gifts as a means to gain even more in the world, we need to take the time to enjoy these gifts and see the hand of God in them.
5. As Christians, no matter how difficult our circumstances in life, we do not hate life.
6. No. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:10, we should desire to "love life and see good days," by doing good and seeking peace.
7. As we pour ourselves into these things, we will get the most out of life and ultimately bring glory to God.