

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
“The Right Question”
January 28, 2024

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. ¹**

The answer is 42.

Did you know that?

The answer is 42.

Douglas Adams, in his novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* has a character named Deep Thought. Deep Thought is a supercomputer that is given the task of answering the question regarding the answer to life, the universe, and everything. The computer begins its computations and

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 1:12–18.

takes a very long time to come up with the answer. In fact, it takes seven and a half million years and eventually the computer provides the answer.

The answer to the meaning to 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?”

The computer Deep Thought responds, “I checked it very thoroughly 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

In case you’re wondering, the answer to life’s deepest questions is not 42. Yet, there is some truth revealed in Adam’s book. All people seek meaning to life at some level. All ask questions. Yet, many are not asking the correct question.

This is the human condition and as we read and preach through this Old Testament book of wisdom, we may struggle to see the light in the darkness. Of all the books in the Bible, this one seems to jump right into the existential question asked by humanity for millennia, and unless one can rightly see this book as God’s inspired word to us with an underlying good news message, the ultimate revelation will be lost.

We already have addressed the somber questions of the Preacher (likely Solomon, the king of Israel) who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit refuses to hide behind the façade of “having it all together” and reveals the deep, heart questions that sadly, many in the church have not felt permission to voice but echo themselves.

So, not unlike Thom Scholz, Solomon could say...

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

*I'm confused
But I'm doin' the best that I can
I've been tossed around plenty before
I've had this heart of mine broken and more
I can't find a reason for sure
But I've gotten used to bad news.³*

But is life simply a gathering of bad news stories? Is this all there is? The Preacher in Ecclesiastes seems to be thinking that the vanity of life is nothing but toil for no reason. An emptiness that cannot be filled.

And that may be why Ecclesiastes seems to resonate with so many. For some of you have told me “Oh, that’s my favorite book in the Bible.” Okay, but why? Because as you read the questions, experience the futility that is penned to paper in your Bible, you silently “amen” because finally, someone is saying something you’re feeling? Is that it?

It is for many.

But this is not a weekly gathering of the somberly settled, where frustrated Christians gather looking for a weekly pick-me-up. This is not a support group for the perpetually depressed who declare “I’m not negative, just a realist.” This is not a Jesus club that fights to market good experiences, or better experiences than the Jesus club down the street with hopes of perpetuating the business of American Christianity. This is not the gathering of the perfect Christian social media influencers who share perfected images of the life they want others to think they have.

There is more. There must be, right?

And there is, and thanks to God for giving us truth in his Word that reveals this.

³ Scholz, Tom. “Used to Bad News.” *Don’t Look Back*. Epic, 1978.

Such is our gathering. We gather because we must. Because what God has for us together as his church is needed, not for him, but for us. This is not a marketing strategy; this is a life.

And even when the questions steeped in existential postmodernism (or maybe just the honest doubts of exhausted people) come, we can know (seriously, KNOW) that this is not only NOT a waste of our time, but essential and right and good and helpful and holy and glorifying to the God who was, who is, and always will be.

Therefore, we thank God that he gives us his word, with honest, heart-wrenching, even doubt-saturated verses that refuse to allow us to continue vicariously living through the Christianese of loved ones, family expectations, and superficiality. Welcome to the real world with the real God who knows what we really need.

Through this section we see the reality faced by God's Preacher, and ultimately by many more throughout the centuries. In the quest for meaning, we discover why there is a declaration from the writer that "life is vanity."

Three things to consider, from the one who wrote this by God's inspiration, and the one who has been declared most wise of men. We look at three words that are similar, but will impact each of us differently.

- 1. WORTH**
- 2. WORTHLESS**
- 3. WORTHY**

WORTH

When Solomon took account of all that he valued, of all that he sought, of the wisdom he had attained, he was faced with the ultimate question, "What is all this worth?"

This is the life question of all, is it not?

What is all that we do, all that we have, all that we want really worth.

In 2004 a man named Daniel Tammet entered into the record books when he broke the European record for reciting pi from memory. Most of us remember learning this in math class. Pi is the mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. Now, most of us know the number as 3.14 and that's as far as we go, but in reality, pi just keeps going on and on and this man recited from memory the first 22,514 digits in pi.

Tammet has been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and in his unique case he is gifted to be able to memorize numbers and learn languages quickly. He even learned the Icelandic language in just a week. It is truly remarkable.⁴

His memoir, titled *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*, he states:

I still remember vividly the experience I had as a teenager lying on the floor of my room staring up at the ceiling. I was trying to picture the universe in my head, to have a concrete understanding of what “everything” was. In my mind I traveled to the edges of existence and looked over them, wondering what I would find. In that instant I felt really unwell and I could feel my heart beating hard inside me, because for the first time I had realized that thought and logic had limits and could only take a person so far. This realization frightened me and it took me a long time to come to terms with it.⁵

⁴ O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 31.

⁵ Tammet, Daniel. *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 223-4.

Tammet, with his special skills was caught in a web of questions. He grew frustrated at what he knew and what he could know and how what he could know was never enough. It was limited.

Tammet is not unlike many others, some whom the world have called genius due to IQ, education, and theoretical capabilities.

Yet, even those whom the world decries as purveyors of wisdom, there remains a gap. The world's wisdom has been sought for generations. Some find themselves at the top of their respective ladder, esteemed by others, wealthier than many, sought after by crowds, and so on...and yet continually prove that what they value as worthwhile and important is limited.

This is what Solomon decries.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

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. ⁶

Solomon sought answers to the question.

So too did others throughout history. Descartes is said to have shut himself in a room with an oven to escape the cold. Myth states that he actually slept in an oven, but actually slept in a room with a masonry heater. That's not the focus. What happened during that stay was his declaration in his text "Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences."⁷ Fun reading.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 1:12–14.

⁷ DeMichele, Thomas. "René Descartes Slept in an Oven - Fact or Myth?" *Fact / Myth*, 26 July 2019, <http://factmyth.com/factoids/rene-descartes-slept-in-an-oven>.

Yet, this is where he developed his famous saying, “Cogito ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am.” Everything else in life could be doubted as real because his solid ground was that he had a consciousness.⁸

This has been described as the most disastrous day in Western history.⁹

Others have sought the answer of worth for ages. People like Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others deemed wise by the world come to mind.

Yet, just as the pi man discovered...there will always be a gap.

Here’s the thing. Human wisdom and knowledge are limited and will help with some answers, but ultimately even the wisest will be asking “What is the point?”

What is the value of getting the right answers to your deepest questions, if your deepest questions are the wrong questions?

Douglas Adams’ computer says the answer is 42.

But that answer and many others we get are...

WORTHLESS

Have you ever watched Pawn Stars or maybe Antiques Roadshow and see someone on there who is totally convinced that they have the one item that will provide funds for their retirement. They are betting the value of their special item is so high and the worth of it is so great that others will be in awe, only to have reality hit them like a brick when the evaluators reveal their treasure is common and other than for sentimental value, worthless.

⁸ Bartholomew, Craig G. *Ecclesiastes: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 125.

⁹ Brown, C. *Philosophy and the Christian Faith: A Historical Sketch from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 52.

It can be heartbreaking, and I know that many of those shows are setups and not real. Yet, these shows have been viewed by many and led hordes of people to go into their attic or garage to see what priceless item may be stored up from years gone by.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is facing the reality that what he valued gained him nothing. His treasures on earth are not satisfying.

He is somewhat the opposite of Job. Both are facing crises of belief. Both are faced with coming to grips with value, yet one, Job lost it all and had to face the hard truths of life, along with the very real sorrow that comes with it. The other, Solomon, had an experiential crisis that revealed, in his own mind, that despite all that he had in life – money, power, women, influence, and more...it was all worthless.

The wisest man was drowning in what he defined as worthlessness.

You may have not used the term, but most Christians have faced a crisis of belief.

Henry Blackaby speaks of the crisis of belief when he says that the crisis may not be a moment like Job's or some trauma such as an accident or death, but it does come. This crisis of belief is a turning point or a fork in the road that demands you make a decision. You have to decide what you believe about God. You have to decide how you will respond to God.¹⁰ You have to decide whether your faith is an add-on to your busy life or more? Is your faith yours, or just all you know because your family brought you to church? Is what you read and hear today truth? Is it real? What about difficult times? What about hard situations? What about sorrow?

¹⁰ Blackaby, Henry and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: Fifteenth Anniversary Edition* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 213.

All of that still happens and the Christian is not immune to any of it. Yet, we are faced with recognizing that what some deem as the end-all, be-all, and the focus of life is ultimately worthless. Thus, the crisis.

Back to Thom Scholz and his lyrics for songs. This one by Boston is one of my favorites, but it seems Solomon could have written it.

Now you're climbin' to the top of the company ladder
Hope it doesn't take too long
Can'tcha see there'll come a day when it won't matter?
Come a day when you'll be gone.

I understand about indecision
But I don't care if I get behind
People livin' in competition
All I want is to have my peace of mind.¹¹

Sounds like Ecclesiastes. "Can'tcha see there's come a day when it won't matter. Come a day when you'll be gone."

Worthless.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-17

¹⁶I 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." ¹⁷And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. ¹²

WORTHY

With all the minor key verses that drag a person down in this chapter, we have to end where the Holy Spirit points. What we see in Solomon's declarations, in the Preacher's sermon, is not totally a message of

¹¹ Scholz, Tom. "Peace of Mind." *Boston*. Epic, 1976.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 1:16–17.

despair, but a statement with no sugar-coating leading to an answer of hope.

Solomon in his life sought truth, sought hope, sought answers. In this chapter it seems he did not find these, yet his quest is more than commendable.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

**¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. ¹³**

This chapter ends with sorrow.

This section of scripture reveals what Solomon found. The next chapter reveals what God gives. What is sought is worth. What is found by human effort is worthless, but what is given by God is worthy.

That makes all the difference.

The worthy gift of God, ultimately shown in the person of Jesus Christ – the Son of God, God the Son, proves to be the answer to the questions about life.

Earthly wisdom cannot change reality. Earthly wisdom and accumulation of stuff cannot satisfy a person ultimately. Yet, God’s great gift of wisdom, love, and life who is Christ himself IS that answer.

Thus, all those 1970s-era bumper stickers and t-shirts that declared “Jesus is the answer” were correct. He was and is the answer.

To the right question.

Have you asked the right question?

¹³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 1:18.