

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 2:12-17
“The Great Equalizer”
February 11, 2024

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

¹² 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. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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 dies just like the fool! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. ¹

Have you ever lost something you needed and then became frustrated when you couldn't find it? Maybe it was your keys, a credit card, your wallet, or the remote control?

This happens way too much, and the older I get, it somehow seems to happen more. Thankfully, if it's my phone, I can use the Find My app and have it start beeping like a submarine so everyone in a three mile radius can hear it.

But at other times, the lost things that are needed can raise our blood pressure and cause us great frustration.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:12–17.

I remember years ago we lost the remote control to our television. I could not find it. I ended up buying a universal remote and using it, but it never worked quite right. Eventually, like six or eight months later I found the remote control on the top shelf in our closet. Not sure why it was there but being that I was the one person who can reach the top shelf in that closet, I couldn't blame anyone else.

Think about a time you have misplaced something.

I'm not sure you do what I do, but perhaps.

First, when we have misplaced something, we look in the most logical place to find it.

But have you ever looked in that place only to discover the item is not there?

So, you look at other places.

Maybe you don't do this, but I do. Sometimes I go back to that first place and look again.

If I still cannot find it. I may go back a third or fourth time. Why? Because that is the only place where I can imagine it being. Surely, I have just missed it, right? Maybe it is here, but I cannot see it. It is under something. Fell between items. Is behind the cushion, or under the seat, or something. It must be there. Right?

When something is missing, we go back to the place where it ought to be, even if we have looked there before.²

What does this have to do with Solomon and this portion of Ecclesiastes?

² Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 59.

Solomon has lost something. He has misplaced his meaning, his joy, his purpose for living. He believed he had it at one point, but now looking back on his life, he is frustrated because what he took for granted and celebrated with his earthly wisdom now seems to be missing.

So...he turns, as he states, and goes back to find it. And he does what we have done so often. He looks. He cannot find it. He gets frustrated. He goes about his business, but then comes back again and again, looking for the lost item in the exact same place. He is just hoping that this time, it will appear. He will find it. He will have what he is looking for.

Solomon's quest is not unlike what is declared in the lyrics to U2's hit from the 1980s.

*I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone*

*But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for³*

Maybe this hits a bit too close to home for many but take heart even if it does. Why? Because through God's providence, he provided this in his inerrant Word for his own glory, but also for your good. For my good. Yes, even in this quest to find meaning. In this truth behind the curtain of superficiality and religious positioning, the honesty of one who searched, and went back and searched again, and made major mistakes in his longing, gives us hope. I'll explain as we look at this short passage today.

We can see three elements of two in this passage that seem to be defining Solomon's search for meaning and frustration for life. These

³ U2. *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*, Island Records. 1987.

three pairs reveal comparisons, contrasts, and combinations of feelings and ideas that can appear to leave the reader empty and ready to throw in the towel. But...be patient and careful that you do not miss the point.

The three pairs are:

1. MADNESS AND FOLLY
2. LIGHT AND DARKNESS
3. VANITY AND STRIVING

MADNESS AND FOLLY

Ecclesiastes 2:12

¹² 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. ⁴

Actually, the pair should be wisdom and madness and folly. Here's why. When Solomon uses the terms madness and folly he is doing so as a figure of speech called a hendiadys (HEN-DYE-EH-DES). This means two words are joined by the conjunction "and" to create and express a single idea.

For example, in Shakespeare's Macbeth when he says that life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,"⁵ he is not making a careful distinction between sound and fury but merges those together to describe the furious sound that comes from someone who cannot speak but simply roars and groans.⁶ Thus, the contrast and comparison is not between madness and folly, but between wisdom which God has gifted Solomon and what he deems as life defined as craziness...or madness and folly.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:12.

⁵ Shakespeare, William, Macbeth, Act V, scene v.

⁶ Ryken, 59.

Solomon’s “turn” to consider is a turn from his topic of self-pleasure and doing all he can in life to find pleasure and meaning, as we discussed last Sunday to a focus once more on wisdom.

Yet, even here there is much to consider. Truly, throughout the ages, the interpretation of this verse has caused quite a lot of confusion. In a very literal sense, the original language...at least as viewed word-for-word makes no sense as it stands.⁷

But, in context the meaning seems to shine through. The man who comes after the king won’t figure out meaning. Why? Because even he the king, the wise king, couldn’t do it. Thus, the implication is that if he cannot find meaning or significance, then no one can.⁸ Just a bit precocious, right?

Nonetheless, the contrast between wisdom and madness is now on the front burner.

Wisdom from God vs. madness and folly. The turn toward wisdom has occurred for the Preacher, but initially all it reveals is that every single thing he has done, tried, enjoyed, and sought for pleasure is empty. It is craziness. It is behavior that is senseless and irrational.⁹

Wisdom wins...but emptiness remains.

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Ecclesiastes 2:13

¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.¹⁰

⁷ Longman, Tremper III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 96.

⁸ Longman, 96.

⁹ Bartholomew, Craig G. *Ecclesiastes: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 140.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:13.

This sounds like more traditional Christianese, right?

This is good stuff and we have been told throughout our lives about the imagery of light versus darkness and how that illustrates Christ and hope and purpose and being versus the emptiness of worldliness.

Right?

Sure. And that's true.

Yet, here in Solomon's discourse his declaration does not resolve.

A verse out of context seems to say "Yay Solomon! That's good stuff." But, in reading thoroughly it is clear that while this is true, it is not bringing him joy.

Sure, wisdom is good. Light is better than darkness. Understanding is preferred over being confused. But...what is he saying here? What is the primary point?

It's about gains and losses.

- More gain in wisdom than folly.
- More gain in light than darkness.

It's practical. You don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar to understand this. Wisdom leads to better outcomes than folly. Wisdom is a gift from God and a wise understanding of life ends better for everyone. Madness and folly are a fools' journey. The ridiculous throw caution to the wind and live for pleasure (That's exactly what Solomon did. He said he did.)

It seems like simple math. Fools do foolish things. Wise people do wise things.

What you do is a result of who you are.

Light is better than darkness. Why? Because there is so much in darkness that remains hidden, unrevealed, and even dangerous. These are proverbial statements that echo what has been stated in other places throughout scripture.

Have you ever had to say something aloud just to hear your own voice say it so that you could get a better understanding, if not a reminder of truth?

That's this – these points are not unknown. Solomon knows this. He knew this. Now he says this so he can hear this. Hopefully, it will be enough. But...at this point it is not.

Light and darkness are opposites and the logical reaction is “light is better.”

But then why do so many choose to run from the light, live in the darkness, and hope maybe next time it will work out better?

Because madness and folly are the normative realities for many. This is evidence of our depravity and distance from God.

VANITY AND STRIVING

As this section winds down, the seemingly clear cheers for wisdom are drowned out by the great equalizer.

What is the great equalizer?

Death.

Solomon rightly sees that wisdom is better than folly, but then comes to the conclusion it makes no difference. What difference does it make if both fool and wise person end with the same fate, death?¹¹

¹¹ Bartholomew, 141.

Of course, the Old Testament Israelites, including Solomon, had a different perspective of death than even those in the New Testament and certainly different than we do today.

There's Sheol, the place of darkness and gloom (remember, light is better than darkness.)¹² Yet, even then Sheol was not a huge focus for Old Testament writers. One historian has declared that the underworld truly was a place of little interest to the Hebrew writers.¹³ Of course, that's debated by other historians.

Ultimately, eternity and life after our time on earth is of great value, though expressed differently by the Hebrews of old. The evidence of eternity as vital is expressed in chapter three of this book.

But for this moment, based on what the Preacher is writing, the frustration with life is that it seems regardless what you do with your life, who you impact, what you invent, what you own, where you live, who you marry, how you treat others, whether you're a genius or an idiot, wise or foolish...one day you die.

The story is told of Alexander the Great and his friend Diogenes, a famous philosopher. Diogenes was standing alone in a field, looking intently at a large pile of bones. Alexander asked what he was doing and he said, "I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves."¹⁴

It's like a jigsaw puzzle. You dump out the pieces. Work for hours to put together the final product. Maybe have others help you. You use wisdom to do it correctly – turn the pieces right side up, put the box lid there so you can see it, start with the edge pieces, do the certain images or colors next, and eventually put the final piece in. You stare at it. Maybe take a

¹² Bartholomew, 141.

¹³ Bartholomew, 142.

¹⁴ Blanchard, John. *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 4.

picture of it. But then...you destroy the final work and put it all back in the box to do again one day...maybe. And it goes in a box. Forgotten.

Like people.

Back in the box. And life moves on for everyone else.

Depressing.

You can see what the Preacher is facing.

Then he says this...

Ecclesiastes 2:17

¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. ¹⁵

He hated life!

Why? Because everything done under the sun was grievous and caused him frustration. People bothered him. Circumstances overwhelmed him. Pleasure experiences were temporary and never lasted. Addictions just led to more severe addictions.

ALL IS VANITY. It's a striving after wind.

And...maybe he's right.

Maybe.

But maybe he's right because of this phrase "what is done under the sun."

That's the key. Maybe it is due to limiting our vision for only that which is under the sun?

¹⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:17.

You see, the Creator is above all. He is not “under the sun.” The Son of God is over all. He is where our vision should focus. “What is done under the sun” will always fall short of “what is done for the Son.”

Of course the Preacher lived prior to the sending the Son of God at the incarnation, but we live with all that in our history. Thus, we have a better perspective. A complete story.

The Son is wisdom:

1 Corinthians 1:24

²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.¹⁶

The Son is light:

John 8:12

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”¹⁷

The Son is who we strive for:

Philippians 3:12

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I **press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹⁸**

“So I hated life” he says. Maybe you have said, or are saying that as well. Good news. The life you hate is incomplete. Likely because you’re under the sun, and not under the Son.

Today – the Spirit is drawing you to the Son who is wisdom, the light, and the way, truth, and life.

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 1:24.

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 8:12.

¹⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 3:12.