

Living a Meaningful Life

The Vanity of Living Wisely

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

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Scripture

We continue in our sermon series on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes, also known as “Qoheleth” and “the Preacher,” wanted to know how to live a meaningful life. He tried all kinds of ways to live a meaningful life. Today we shall see how he discovered the vanity of living wisely.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in 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. (Ecclesiastes 2:12-17)

Introduction

In early 1886, Australian George Harrison was employed to build a homestead on a South African farm. He had been a gold digger in Australia and had come to South Africa with the hope of making his fortune.

In his spare time, Harrison panned for gold, and that March he found a surface outcrop of gold embedded in a rock. In April, he was granted a prospector’s license and soon the gold rush in South Africa was on. The city of Johannesburg grew out from this

and by 1889, Johannesburg was the largest town in southern Africa. Today these world-famous gold mines produce nearly 280,000 pounds of gold annually.

So what happened to George Harrison? After years of prospecting in Australia prior to his arrival in South Africa and then unknowingly coming upon the biggest gold strike in history, Harrison sold his claim for just \$20.00 only one month after his discovery.

Later, while traveling from a farm in Johannesburg to Barberton, lions killed him. George Harrison never was able to enjoy the fruit of his long years of prospecting.¹

It is probably fair to say that George Harrison did not make a wise decision regarding his claim. He sold the fortune that was his for a mere \$20.00. But even if he had made a wise decision and kept the claim, would George Harrison have discovered how to live a meaningful life?

I think that it is this approach to life that the Preacher has in mind in our text for today.

Review

The Preacher opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11).

His theme is simple: *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”² It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher’s theme is that everything in life is meaningless. For twelve and a half chapters he demonstrates his theme.

However, the Preacher eventually gives a corrective at the very end of his book. He says that everything in life is meaningless

¹ See <https://www.preaching-illustrations.com/home.asp>.

² James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

without God. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don't live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

The Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless without God.

The Preacher first explored wisdom (1:12-18). He discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from wisdom.

Then, the Preacher explored pleasure and self-indulgence (2:1-11). Here too he discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from self-indulgence.

In his continuing quest to find how to live a meaningful life, the Preacher turned his attention next to living wisely.

Lesson

In today's lesson we learn that apart from God, we will not gain anything from living wisely.

I. The Thesis (2:12-14a)

First, let's look at the thesis.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:12a, **“So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly.”**

“Madness” and **“folly”** go together. The Preacher is not describing three categories but only two.

On the one hand, the Preacher is describing **“wisdom.”** One commentator says that **“wisdom”** is used here “in its most general sense to refer to human thinking at its very best. Wisdom in this sense is not the deep spiritual understanding that begins and ends with the fear of the Lord, but simply good, moral, practical advice for daily life that comes from people like Benjamin Franklin, Emi-

ly Post, Oprah Winfrey, and Dr. Phil.”³

On the other hand, there is “**madness and folly.**” These two terms go together. The Preacher is using a figure of speech known as *hendiadys*, which is when two words are joined together by the word “and” to express a single idea. So, the Preacher is talking about “mad folly.”

Henry Ward Beecher was a well-known preacher in the middle part of the nineteenth century. One Sunday he arrived at the Plymouth Church to find several letters waiting for him. He opened the letters and read them. However, one letter simply had one word written on the sheet of paper: “Fool.”

A short while later he went into the sanctuary to begin the Worship Service. He announced the following to his congregation, “I have known many an instance of a man writing a letter and forgetting to sign his name, but this is the only instance I have ever known of a man signing his name and forgetting to write the letter!”⁴

The Preacher is contrasting “**wisdom**” and “mad folly.” In other words, he is trying to understand the difference between living wisely and living foolishly to see if that could give the answer to living a meaningful life.

The next part of the verse is difficult. The Preacher said in verse 12b, “**For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.**” The Preacher is saying that anyone who comes after someone like King Solomon—the wisest man who ever lived—will only learn **what has already been done.**

Then the Preacher set out his thesis statement in verse 13: “**Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.**”

The Preacher is saying that there is a major difference between **wisdom** and **folly**. He immediately confirms this with a proverb in verse 14a, “**The wise person has his eyes in his head,**

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 59.

⁴ See <https://www.preaching-illustrations.com/home.asp>.

but the fool walks in darkness.”

There is a tremendous difference between **wisdom** and **folly**, between **the wise person** and **the fool**, between wise living and foolish living. It would seem that **the wise person** has a vast advantage over **the fool**.

II. The Problems (2:14b-16)

But, the Preacher quickly points out two problems with the thesis that the wise person has a vast advantage over the fool.

A. The Same Fate Awaits Both the Wise and the Fool (2:14c-15)

First, the same fate awaits both the wise and the fool.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15, **“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.”**

When the Preacher talks about **“the same event”** he is of course referring to death.

Both the wise person and the fool will die. It is not as if one will escape death and the other will not. Both will die. Death is no respecter of persons.

Preaching Professor Haddon Robinson told the story of what it was like for him to stand at the graveside of a man who had a working knowledge of thirty-four languages. Most people know only one or two languages, but here was a man who knew almost three dozen languages. Yet, in the end it did not matter how many languages he knew—he still died.⁵ For as the Psalmist says in Psalm 49:10 (*The Living Bible*), **“Rich man! Proud man! Wise man! You must die like all the rest! You have no greater lease on life than foolish, stupid men.”**

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 62.

B. *There Is No Enduring Remembrance of the Wise or the Fool (2:16)*

And the second problem is that there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or the fool.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:16, **“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!”**

After a long time there is no enduring memory of either the wise person or of the foolish person.

Alexander the Great learned this lesson in a dramatic way from his friend Diogenes, a famous philosopher. Alexander found Diogenes standing alone in a field, looking intently at a large pile of human bones. When Alexander asked him what he was doing, Diogenes said, “I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves.”⁶

III. The Result (2:17a)

Third, notice the result.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:17a, **“So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. . . .”**

One commentator said, “It is one thing to be disappointed with life and all its frustrations, but hating life is another thing entirely.”⁷ People who do not find meaning in life can often find themselves hating life itself.

The Preacher points out that life is without meaning—apart from God. The expression **“under the sun”** is used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, and it refers to life from our human perspective, life from our vantage point. It is living life without reference to God—

⁶ John Blanchard, *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 4.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 64.

and that kind of life is often found to be **grievous**, as it was for the Preacher.

Others have reached the same conclusion as the Preacher.

The French philosopher Voltaire wrote to a close friend and said, “I hate life, and yet I am afraid to die.”⁸

Francois Mauriac, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952, wrote these words, “You can’t imagine the torment of having had nothing out of life, and of having to look forward to nothing but death, of feeling that there is no other world beyond this one, that the puzzle will never be explained.”⁹

In the late 1980s, Carter Cooper moved into his mother’s penthouse apartment in downtown Manhattan. His mother was multi-millionaire Gloria Vanderbilt, the writer, socialite and fashion designer who was the great-great granddaughter of railroad and shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt. His younger brother is Anderson Cooper of CNN. Carter was described by a neighbor as a “very nice chap, he was very pleasant, very agreeable, very well behaved. He was a model young man.” He was a handsome, wealthy, Princeton graduate and an editor for *American Heritage Magazine*.

But all was not well for the twenty-three year old Carter. He was suffering from depression after a break-up with his girlfriend. He was seeing a therapist who had prescribed medication for him.

On the evening of July 22, 1988 at about 7 p.m., Carter stumbled into his mother’s room and muttered, “What’s it all about?”

Then he ran to her terrace and sat on its wall. Keeping his terrified mother at bay with a rigidly outstretched arm, he asked, “Will I ever feel again?”

For the next few minutes, Gloria tried to persuade her son off the wall. But in the end he went over the wall and plunged 14 sto-

⁸ Voltaire, quoted in Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1860; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 41.

⁹ Francois Mauriac, *The Knot of Vipers*, in *A Mauriac Reader* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), 315.

ries to his death.¹⁰

He hated life to the point of taking his own life.

IV. The Conclusion (2:17b)

Finally, we see the conclusion.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:17b, “. . . **for all is vanity and a striving after wind.**”

Life, apart from God, is vanity. Without God in our lives, we might as well try to catch the wind. It is meaningless. It is futile.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1999, actor Brad Pitt reflected on his lead role in the movie *Fight Club*, which is about a man who has the American dream and yet remains unsatisfied:

Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success. But if that’s the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don’t want that.

When asked what he thinks should happen, Pitt replied:

I don’t have those answers yet. The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I’m sitting in it, and I’m telling you, that’s not it. I’m the guy who’s got everything. I know. But I’m telling you, once you’ve got everything, then you’re just left with yourself. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: it doesn’t help you sleep any better, and you don’t wake up any better because of it.¹¹

Although Brad Pitt does not know it, he has arrived at the

¹⁰ See <https://www.preaching-illustrations.com/home.asp>.

¹¹ See <https://www.preaching-illustrations.com/home.asp>.

same conclusion as the Preacher: Apart from God, **all is vanity**.

Conclusion

And so the Preacher's conclusion is that apart from God, we will not gain anything from living wisely.

In his autobiography *Just As I Am*, Billy Graham recalls a story demonstrating that apart from God, we will not gain anything from living wisely. He said:

Some years ago Ruth and I had a vivid illustration of this on an island in the Caribbean. One of the wealthiest men in the world had asked us to come to his lavish home for lunch. He was 75 years old, and throughout the entire meal he seemed close to tears. "I am the most miserable man in the world," he said. "Out there is my yacht. I can go anywhere I want to. I have my private plane, my helicopters. I have everything I want to make my life happy, yet I am as miserable as hell." We talked to him and prayed with him, trying to point him to Christ, who alone gives lasting meaning to life.

Then we went down the hill to a small cottage where we were staying. That afternoon the pastor of the local Baptist church came to call. He was an Englishman, and he too was 75—a widower who spent most of his time taking care of his two invalid sisters. He was full of enthusiasm and love for Christ and others. "I don't have two pounds to my name," he said with a smile, "but I am the happiest man on this island."

Billy Graham relates how he asked his wife Ruth after they left, "Who do you think is the richer man?"

She did not have to reply because they both already knew the answer.¹²

When you examine your life, what do you find?

First, I want to address you if you are not yet a Christian. You have never made a profession of faith. Or perhaps you call

¹² See <https://www.preaching-illustrations.com/home.asp>.

yourself a Christian, but if I were to ask you, “Have you been born again?” you would have no idea what I am talking about. There are some of you here today who are not yet born again. Let me talk to you for a minute.

The Preacher is teaching you that you have not yet discovered the meaning to life. Perhaps you are here today because you are searching for the meaning to life. And I am here to point you to the Preacher who is saying that apart from God, you will not gain anything from living wisely. Apart from God, you will not understand the meaning of life. For you, all is vanity.

And second, I want to address you if you call yourself a Christian. At some point in your life you made a profession of faith. Perhaps you were a child. Or perhaps you were older. Regardless of when you made a profession of faith, you call yourself a Christian.

However, you live your life without much thought of God. Oh, you go to church. You may give your money to church. But you do not live your life with much conscious thought of God and his sovereign rule over your life.

Whether you are not yet a Christian or a professing Christian who is living without conscious reference to God, you are living your life “under the sun,” as the Preacher says. In other words, you are looking at life from a secular perspective. You are living your life apart from God.

Your life will never have meaning and purpose until you submit yourself consciously and fully to God. God created us for fellowship with himself. But sin has created a barrier between us and God. And until we turn from our sin and place our full trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ, nothing in life will ultimately make sense and enable us to live meaningful lives.

So, turn from your sin. Put your trust in Jesus Christ alone. Commit yourself to live wholeheartedly under the sovereign rule of God. And then you will discover that with God in your life, you will live a meaningful life. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher teaches us that apart from God, we will not gain anything from living wisely.

Enable us to repent of our sinful ways. Enable us to trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. And then enable us to commit ourselves fully and completely to you so that we can live a meaningful life.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.